

KIERKEGAARD'S CHRISTIAN RHETORIC

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presented to the faculty of  
The School of Theology at Claremont  
in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

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*This dissertation, written by*

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- AC = Attack Upon "Christendom"
- AR = On Authority and Revelation
- CD = The Concept of Dread
- ChD = Christian Discourses
- CLA = Crisis in the Life of an Actress
- CUP = Concluding Unscientific Postscript
- ED, I-IV = Edifying Discourses, 4 vols.
- ED, ed. Holmer = Edifying Discourses: A Selection
- E/O, I-II = Either/Or, 2 vols.
- FSE = For Self-Examination
- GS = The Gospel of Suffering
- JP, I-VII = Journals and Papers, 7 vols.
- JFY = Judge for Yourself
- PA = The Present Age
- PF = Philosophical Fragments
- PH = Purity of Heart
- PV = The Point of View for My Work as an Author
- SD = The Sickness Unto Death
- SLW = Stages on Life's Way
- TC = Training in Christianity
- WL = Works of Love

## ABSTRACT

The motive behind this dissertation is the search for a paradigm of homiletics as a theological discipline. Soren Kierkegaard had a similar concern. He believed preachers had not understood the unique problems posed by the communication of Christianity, and had merely adapted the categories of classical or "pagan" rhetoric. The result was that the Christian message was contradicted or subverted by the form in which it was presented. Kierkegaard therefore proposed to write (but never finished) a new "art of preaching" based on a theological transformation of Aristotle's Rhetoric.

The project of this study is to derive Kierkegaard's Christian rhetoric from his theoretical reflections in the journals and published works and from his praxis in the religious discourses. It is an exercise in the construction of homiletical theory, and relies primarily on the tools of rhetorical criticism. Following the Aristotelian format Kierkegaard had proposed, the basic structure is as follows.

First, the distinctive aims of Christian discourse are examined. Kierkegaard gave them the summary term "edification" in contrast to the classical aim of persuasion. Next, the foundations of homiletical argument are laid in Kierkegaard's theological anthropology, in his dialectic, and in his explorations of the effect of particular Christian doctrines on discourse (Word of God, christology, sin, and authority). Kierkegaard's anthropology focuses on the role of the relationship to God in the structure of the personality, while his dialectic develops a

logic of self-understanding and convictions, and explores the special epistemological problems posed by the Christian revelation.

From these foundations Kierkegaard generates appropriate rhetorical strategies for Christian discourse: "communication of capability," "indirect communication," "maieutic," and "reduplication." By adopting this systematic approach, which ties theological reflection to its corresponding medium of expression, Kierkegaard fulfills the motto of his Christian rhetoric: "to present the truth in its truest form."

Although reservations are expressed regarding the adequacy of Kierkegaard's ecclesiology and christology, I conclude that the formal elements of his Christian rhetoric offer a valuable framework for developing a paradigm of homiletics as a theological discipline.

## INTRODUCTION

There is a formula for introducing a book about preaching. The author begins with a lamentation over the low estate to which preaching has fallen in the public eye, together with an admission that this estimate is partly justified by the failings of many a preacher (the modest author included). There follows a seasonable defense of preaching as God's chosen means of communicating with humankind, and therefore a high and noble calling. Then the author indicates what he (as of this writing they are nearly all men) thinks can be done to put things right.

The solutions vary widely, but with few exceptions they have the following factors in common. 1) They associate the decline of preaching with the problems posed by modernity. An old consensus has broken down, scriptural authority has been undermined, Christianity is challenged by secularism, brought into competition with other religions and ideologies, the spoken word is drowned out by the mass media--and "modern man" feels lost and alienated in the midst of it all. Preachers have been trying to catch up with modernity at least since the beginning of this century; it has become an old problem. 2) From developments in modernity itself, new resources are found for preaching. Freudian psychology gives rise to preaching as a form of counseling; the historical criticism that undermined the authority of the Bible is found to render it more intelligible; communications research gives quantitative measurements of the processes which make for more "effective" communication; secularism invites the preacher to a

reevaluation of traditional language, to find the "secular meaning of the Gospel." 3) These new resources provide prescriptions for homiletical practice. We learn how to incorporate exegesis into our sermons; we give sound psychological advice to the troubled; we institute dialogue sermons, talkback sessions, and multi-media presentations.

The titles of the best recent books on homiletics indicate their topical concern: Edgar Jackson's A Psychology for Preaching, Merrill Abbey's Communication in Pulpit and Parish, Ruell Howe's Partners in Preaching, Thor Hall's The Future Shape of Preaching (arguing in part for a new architecture), James D. Smart's The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church, and now Justo and Catherine Gonzalez's Liberation Preaching. To a large degree these studies are aimed at adjusting an existing homiletical tradition to changes in ethos and to developments in related fields. Such efforts will always be needed; it is the nature of the case that preachers will always be aiming at a moving target.

Yet they also leave the uneasy impression that preaching is forever lagging behind the rest of the world. The problem does not lie in the books I have just mentioned, however, which are all aimed at alleviating it. I believe the problem is with the homiletical climate into which they are received.

At present, the most distinguished contributors to homiletics are those who have been trained in and pursued another theological discipline: biblical studies, church history, or systematic theology. But homiletics itself has not yet found its own identity as a scholarly discipline. No other aspect of religious studies has had so little benefit from disciplined and systematic study, from a scholarly

tradition, as preaching. Despite the thousands of books that have been written on homiletics, there is very little in the literature that could count as primary research, little analysis and criticism of specific homiletical theories, or even of sermons. While extensive borrowing from other disciplines has brought new resources to the preacher, it also reveals the poverty of initiative in homiletics itself. Like cuckoo birds we wait for another species to build the nest, and then lay our eggs in it. The offspring cannot be blamed if they suffer an identity crisis. Without a coherent disciplinary framework of its own, homiletics is left with an accumulation of disparate, sometimes atheological prescriptions for preaching.

Homiletics is not alone in this state of disciplinary disarray. Contemporary rhetoricians face the same problem, and generally introduce their works in the same spirit of embarrassment as homileticians. James Kinneavy gives an insightful statement of the problem:

The field of discourse is still in what (Thomas) Kuhn . . . has called the preparadigm period. That is, there has not yet been erected a comprehensive system of the discipline which has received some general acceptance and which could serve as a framework for research, further speculation, innovation, even repudiation. . . . Each person begins his work anew from different foundations, the same ground is covered again and again with inconclusive results . . . and there are no systematic commitments which can motivate serious innovation. . . .<sup>1</sup>

More than any other factor it is this lack of a coherent framework that accounts for the accumulation of so many repetitive introductions to

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<sup>1</sup> James L. Kinneavy, A Theory of Discourse (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1971), pp. 2-3, citing Thomas S. Kuhn, "The Function of Dogma in Scientific Research," in A.C. Crombie, ed., Scientific Change (New York: Basic Books, 1963), pp. 347-69.



homiletics, and for the difficulty of the few innovative works to have a lasting effect; they have a flash of influence and sink back into the mire. As with discourse theory in general, the primary question for homiletics is not how to borrow more effectively from other disciplines, but how to attain a paradigm that can give homiletics itself the coherence of a discipline.

As a student in one of the few Ph.D. programs in homiletics I have felt this problem perhaps more than most. Seeking an explanation for myself of what my discipline ought to do beyond providing training in speech-making to seminarians has dominated most of my studies. Then, near the end of my coursework, in a seminar taught by Tom Oden, I was introduced to Kierkegaard, and soon caught "the Kierkegaard bug," as Oden put it. I found in him an unexpected ally.

Kierkegaard's authorship, both the published works and the journals, shows an abiding concern with the communication of Christianity as a theological problem. Several times he proposed to write "a strictly scientific work on spiritual eloquence" based on a transformation into Christian categories of the major paradigm that had shaped rhetoric up to his time, that of Aristotle. The project was never realized, at least not explicitly, but the more I read of Kierkegaard the more I became convinced that he had indeed worked out a uniquely Christian rhetoric, that he used it to structure his discourses and continued to develop it throughout his authorship. For his own reasons he chose not to give a formal statement of that rhetoric, although he began to do so in a series of notes for a proposed

lecture series on "The Dialectic of Ethical and Ethical-Religious Communication."

Kierkegaard's reasons for making a fresh start with Christian rhetoric rather than tinkering with the homiletical tradition are important to note, for they mirror in their own way the problem confronting homiletics today. First, he felt that the preachers of his day had abandoned their vocation by measuring themselves against the maximum of being a theological professor instead of seeking above all to "edify," to build up the Christian faith and character of their congregations. Preaching, he felt, demands "the whole time and diligence" of the preacher just as theology does of the professor.<sup>2</sup> As long as the communication of Christianity was not recognized as a problem in its own right, the preaching of the Church was captive to the whims of academic theology.

The second problem is that in place of doing its own study, Kierkegaard felt that homiletics had simply absorbed the techniques of "pagan" rhetoric. It sought to please the listeners, to gain consensus, to move them emotionally—but not to transform them inwardly. Christianity was falsified by being presented in what were essentially Greek categories. A new Christian rhetoric was needed because "with respect to communication, Christianity has a singularity which brings entirely unique categories into force."<sup>3</sup> It would have to take account of the different understanding of human nature presupposed by

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<sup>2</sup> SLW, p. 449.

<sup>3</sup> JP I, #669.

Christianity over that on which the classical tradition was based, and of the special epistemological problems posed by the Christian revelation. And since the aim of Christian preaching is not simply persuasion but the inward transformation of the listener, it requires a rhetorical form which elicits a profound personal struggle. All of these concerns are implied in a phrase of Kierkegaard's which may be taken as a motto for his Christian rhetoric: "to present the truth in its truest form."<sup>4</sup>

The project of this dissertation, then, is to derive Kierkegaard's Christian rhetoric from his scattered comments in the journals and published works, and from reflection on his employment of it in the religious discourses. It is an exercise in the construction (or reconstruction) of rhetorical theory, and relies primarily on the tools of rhetorical criticism.

The field of rhetoric can be looked at in two ways: from the productive end as the art which guides discourse toward achieving its aims, and from the receiving end, as the critical evaluation of the effect of discourse on its listeners or readers. As we work through a sizeable portion of the Kierkegaard corpus, we will be constantly alternating between these two points of view, applying the former to his explicit statements on communication and the latter to his praxis in the discourses (although we should note at the outset that many of Kierkegaard's apparently theoretical statements may themselves be part of a rhetorical strategy). In this way we will be checking our

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<sup>4</sup> JP I, #656.

hypotheses about his rhetorical theory against the evidence of his discourses, and using the discourses to fill in gaps in the theory. This is admittedly a circular process, but I can only say in defense that there is no straight path through Kierkegaard's writings. The measure of success can only be whether the theory we have derived holds together internally, and the degree to which it illuminates Kierkegaard's achievement in the discourses.

Taking a cue from Kierkegaard's proposal to construct his project "admodum Aristotle's Rhetoric,"<sup>5</sup> the basic structure I have used is roughly derived from that classical text. The major elements are: the aims of discourse (Chapter 1), the nature of the audience (Chapter 2), the forms of reasoning and argument that guide rhetoric (Chapter 3), the influence of particular topics on the form and presuppositions of discourse (Chapter 4), and the rhetorical strategies based on these foundations (Chapter 5). It is hoped that by adopting this format Kierkegaard's transformations of the Aristotelian tradition will stand out more clearly, and that we will then have Kierkegaard's position as much as possible in a form which is familiar to students of rhetoric. Chapter 6 is devoted to a summary and an attempt to state my theological reservations about the adequacy of Kierkegaard's rhetoric, specifically from the standpoints of ecclesiology and christology. In Chapter 7 we return to the problem with which we began, by considering Kierkegaard's contributions toward a paradigm of homiletical studies.

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<sup>5</sup> JP I, #627.

## Chapter I

## THE AIMS OF CHRISTIAN DISCOURSE

Why preach? In many cases the most compelling reason is also the most trivial: it is Sunday morning, the congregation expects it, and the preacher is hired to do it. No doubt good reasons were given long ago to the parishioners in confirmation class, and even better ones to the pastor in seminary, but the routine of a sermon a week, years on end, obscures the initial purposes and develops a momentum of its own. To test the weight of this institutional motive for preaching, a pastor might simply ask this question: "How often would I preach (or engage in any other sustained form of public discourse about Christianity) if it were not my job to do so?" An average answer might be several times a year—for special weekday services or when the regular pastor is on vacation.

Preaching because it is customary would not in itself be harmful, however, were it not for the guiding influence that the motive for speaking exercises over the content and effectiveness of what is said. Customary preaching receives a customary response. The case of Kierkegaard is an instructive contrast. Never ordained, never employed by the church (or employed at all for that matter), he nonetheless gave his life over to a bewildering variety of forms of communication, all of which aimed at "the problem of becoming a Christian in Christendom."<sup>1</sup> The reasons he gives for this preoccupation are characteristically both

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<sup>1</sup> PV, p. 92.

personal and theological, but not dogmatic. That is, Kierkegaard does not develop a doctrine of the Word so much as he reflects upon the appropriate rhetorical motives of Christian discourse. His main concern is with what effect a Christian sermon can and should have on its listeners.

Kierkegaard's varying aims are reflected in the titles and subtitles of many of the works: Edifying Discourses, "For Revival and Increase of Inwardness" and "A Christian Definition of Concepts" (Parts I and II of Training in Christianity), For Self-Examination, "A Christian Psychological Exposition for Edification and Awakening" (The Sickness Unto Death). Certainly the most inclusive term for Kierkegaard's aims is "edification." "From the Christian point of view everything, absolutely everything should serve for edification."<sup>2</sup> Although edification covers a broad range of meaning for Kierkegaard, there are two aspects of the concept that remain fairly constant. Both are reflected in the Preface to his Two Edifying Discourses of 1843.

One is the aim of personal encounter. He uses the metaphor of the book going on a journey after its publication:

I saw then how it made its way along solitary paths, or went solitary on the highways. After one and another misunderstanding, due to its being deceived by a casual resemblance, it encountered finally that single individual whom it sought, that individual whom I with joy and gratitude call my reader, that individual whom it seeks, towards whom as it were it stretches out its arms, that individual who is willing enough to let himself be found, willing enough to receive it whether at the moment of encounter it finds him joyous and confident or weary and pensive.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> SD, p. 142.

<sup>3</sup> ED I, 5.

Kierkegaard aims at personal encounter because "it is impossible to edify or to be edified en masse. . . . Edification, even more expressly than love, is related to the individual."<sup>4</sup> This is particularly important in the context of "Christendom," where "we are all Christians—of a sort."<sup>5</sup> In an audience of unbelievers, the individual's response can be measured by its variance from the shared beliefs of the crowd. But in a rhetorical situation where common agreements are simply reinforced by the speaker, there is nothing to distinguish the response of one listener from another. When an entire congregation comes to the altar to "accept Christ," one cannot determine whether the action is an expression of conviction on the part of each individual, or a liturgical practice as routine as standing up for the hymns. Kierkegaard sought to break down the crowd into individuals in order to clarify the quality of commitment.

The desire for a personal encounter with the reader remains constant throughout Kierkegaard's literary activity. Biographically, of course, he sought communication with his beloved Regina, as witnessed by his oblique dedication of the entire authorship to her in For Self-Examination, but this fact is of no more significance to the reader than Dante's frustrated relationship to Beatrice. As a writer, Kierkegaard sought any reader who "converts the speech into a conversation."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> PV, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> PV, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> ED III, 69.

The second invariant aspect of edification is the emphasis on personal appropriation of the message. Again from the "Preface" of 1843, the book is seen as stationary, waiting for the reader:

So it stood there like an insignificant little flower in the cover of a great forest, not sought after either for its splendour, or for its sweet scent, or for its nourishing properties. But I saw then also, or fancied that I saw, how a bird which I call my reader suddenly cast an eye upon it, swooped down in its flight, plucked it and carried it off. And when I had seen this, I saw no more.<sup>7</sup>

The bird takes Kierkegaard's blossom to itself without a hint of a reason, or rather for strictly internal reasons. If the image seems a bit cryptic, it was probably so intended, for it expresses both the intentionality of the reader's appropriation and the mystery of the outcome. The bird flies off, and we "see no more."

Kierkegaard had an ambivalent respect for the integrity of his audience. On one hand, he used every rhetorical artifice available to draw the desired response, and found it "sad and depressing" that "the person concerned stubbornly continues in his view. But on the other hand there is something great in the fact that the other one and every individual is a world to himself and has his holy of holies where no alien hand can force itself in."<sup>8</sup> As a consequence, Kierkegaard saw that edification is not the act of the speaker, but the self-activity of the listener. No matter how convincing, moving, or well-argued a religious address may be, it is only wasted words without the personal appropriation of the listener. As the preacher at the conclusion of

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<sup>7</sup> ED I, 5.

<sup>8</sup> JP I, #24.



Either/Or puts it, "only the truth which edifies is truth for you."<sup>9</sup> In this sense, Kierkegaard's Christian rhetoric is a great elaboration of the Protestant emphasis on the pro me.

With these general aspects of Kierkegaard's aims in mind—encounter and appropriation—it is possible to identify a hierarchy of motives which guide his rhetorical practice. They are here arranged from minimum to maximum, and roughly in the order in which they arise along the road to becoming a Christian, although elements of each are present at every point along the way.

#### TAKING NOTICE

Preachers who are frustrated by the intransigence of their listeners often may wonder if they are capable of accomplishing anything at all. Kierkegaard recognized the problem: "In all eternity it is impossible for me to compel a person to accept an opinion, a conviction, a belief. But one thing I can do: I can compel him to take notice."<sup>10</sup> One may recall the familiar story of the farmer who used a two-by-four on his mule, "to get his attention." This is perhaps an apt image for Kierkegaard's final "Attack Upon Christendom." His effort in this regard was simply to call attention to the fact that the existence of "geographical Christianity," with a thousand paid ministers working at the massive machinery of the institutional-sociological phenomenon, "The

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<sup>9</sup> E/O II, 356.

<sup>10</sup> PV, p. 35.

Church"—that all this did not insure that there were, in fact, any actual Christians.

Naturally this raises the question of what the standards are for being a Christian. Ultimately that is not an appropriate human judgment, but at the least a provisional effort can be made. To this effect, Kierkegaard raised "New Testament Christianity" over against the Church of Denmark, and personal standards of conviction and obedience against institutional standards of baptism and doctrinal conformity. He took a position precisely opposite to that of his countryman Grundtvig and the similar position developed by Horace Bushnell in the United States at about the same time. Bushnell's famous principle of "Christian Nurture" was "That the child is to grow up a Christian, and never know himself as being otherwise."<sup>11</sup> To the contrary, Kierkegaard asserts that no one is born a Christian, and that in order to become one, a person must know that there was a time when he or she was not.<sup>12</sup> Being a Christian is not so simple a thing that it can be done unconsciously.

In a culture dominated by Christianity it is not unusual that for many people the question of their own commitment is never raised in a really decisive way. As a Presbyterian elder I heard over a hundred affirmations of faith from new members being taken into the church, and all were given in the same routine manner as a person gives his or her name and address. That is not necessarily a judgment on their faith;

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<sup>11</sup> Horace Bushnell, Christian Nurture (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916), p. vii.

<sup>12</sup> CUP, p. 332.

there is simply no way of knowing in such a context—a context which hides precisely what it was designed to reveal. Evangelical churches have the same problem, only with more emotion. In culture-Christianity, one can't see the trees for the forest.

The minimal aim, then, is to call a person's attention to the problem of becoming a Christian in Christendom, and in a more general sense to the whole realm of the ethical and the religious. This is the most a speaker can hope for with any degree of confidence. As Johannes Climacus writes in the Postscript, "The very maximum of what one human being can do for another in relation to that wherein each man has solely to do with himself, is to inspire him with concern and unrest."<sup>13</sup> Climacus refers here to concern over one's own eternal happiness, the pseudonym's point of entry for raising the ethical-religious question for the reader. Whether subsequent rhetorical aims come into play, or whether the concern and unrest pass with the night like troubled sleep, depends entirely upon the individual.

#### CONCEPTUAL CLARITY

"Taking notice" and arousing concern and unrest are to some degree essential aspects of all rhetorical activity and are not therefore inherently Christian, even if they take place in church. Every speaker wants to get and retain the audience's attention and to interest them in the concerns of the message. But Christianity is not determined quantitatively by the degree of emotion or controversy one

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<sup>13</sup> CUP, p. 346.

can arouse over it. As Kierkegaard notes in On Authority and

Revelation:

To be shaken (pretty much in the sense that one speaks of shaking a person to make him wake up) is the more universal foundation for all religiousness; the experience of being shaken, of being deeply moved, the coming into being of subjectivity in the inwardness of emotion, the pious pagan and the pious Jew have in common with the Christian . . . and not every outpouring of religious emotion is a Christian outpouring. That is to say: emotion which is Christian is checked by the definition of concepts and when emotion is transposed or expressed in words in order to be communicated, this transposition must occur constantly within the definition of the concepts.<sup>14</sup>

Not only must the Christian communicator have the conceptual framework of Christianity clearly in mind, but he or she must also help the audience attain clarity about their own beliefs. No matter how deeply Christian tradition permeates a culture, it cannot be assumed that the essential aspects of Christianity are a matter of common knowledge. It is Kierkegaard's position that the illusion of Christendom (that everyone is more or less a Christian) implies that everyone also knows more or less what Christianity is. For surely one must know what Christianity is in order to be a Christian.<sup>15</sup> This would not be the case if being a Christian were a matter of human nature, for in a sense we are all human before we know it. However, as a religion based on revelation Christianity has its own conceptual content which cannot be derived either from the simple fact of being human or from independent philosophical speculation. For this reason, Kierkegaard finally found the Socratic "maieutic" method of drawing the truth out of

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<sup>14</sup> AR, p. 163.

<sup>15</sup> CUP, pp. 330ff.

a person to be inadequate, because "Christianly understood, the truth does not lie in the subject . . . but in a revelation which must be proclaimed."<sup>16</sup>

That Christianity cannot be discovered or intuited but must be heard through proclamation is the reason for the centrality of preaching through much of Christian history—despite the widely varying content of the proclamation. Certainly there was no shortage of proclamation in Kierkegaard's Christendom, nor is there today. But as any preacher can confirm, there is no direct connection between hearing and understanding. And as any listener to sermons can confirm, just because something is preached, it is not thereby the Gospel. When preachers offer up poetry, psychology, and metaphysics to congregations who take it all in as if it were the weather report, the result is a hopeless mess: "Just as a toothless old man is reduced to mumbling through the gums, so modern discourse about Christianity has lost the vigor that can only come from an energetically sustained terminology, and the whole is reduced to toothless twaddle."<sup>17</sup> The confusion of such preaching produces a corresponding confusion in the congregation. Disjointed insights and scraps of wisdom from memorable sermons are piled up through the years in the listener's memory. Christianity at last becomes unintelligible through the sheer weight of inconsistent and undigested proclamation.

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<sup>16</sup> JP II, #1957.

<sup>17</sup> GUP, p. 325.

To combat this Christian Babel, Kierkegaard sought a "naivete" or "primitivity" in order "to make the Socratic distinction between what one understands and what one does not understand."<sup>18</sup> A parable from the Journals and Papers may clarify what Kierkegaard means:

Just as a rich man owning a valuable collection of art works or a splendid castle, etc., takes pleasure in having everyone come to see it and express his opinion about it, so God's joy in the world is that everyone should be a single individual who tells with primitivity what he wonders about most.

If there were a book in that rich man's house containing what the previous visitors had jotted down of their feelings and opinions, he would not want the next one to read the book before going in to see the collection.<sup>19</sup>

As the parable indicates, primitivity does not mean crudity, but originality in the sense of generating one's own response without it being determined or obscured by the responses of others. Primitivity is also associated with wonder. One may recall here Aristotle's maxim that all philosophy begins in wonder, although Kierkegaard maintains that it is much more the case that religion begins in wonder.<sup>20</sup> In one of his Christian Discourses Kierkegaard describes an Apostle's grief that "There is no one that wonders," that all receive the message as a matter of indifference.<sup>21</sup> One aim of the discourse, then, is to restore a sense of original wonder at the Christian message.

Wonder is not achieved by fiat, however, especially when one is expected to wonder at what has become commonplace. One cannot simply forget what has been drummed in over the years in order to hear the

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<sup>18</sup> JP I, #654.

<sup>19</sup> JP III, #3449.

<sup>20</sup> SLW, pp. 457ff.

<sup>21</sup> ChD, p. 112.

Gospel as if for the first time. Thus it may seem ironic, but the counterpart of wonder in Christendom is reflection on what has already been heard. It is in this sense that Kierkegaard's claim must be understood, that he "carried to completion the work of reflection, the task of translating completely into terms of reflection what Christianity is, what it means to become a Christian."<sup>22</sup>

Kierkegaard distinguishes certain of his works as "reflections" by virtue of their rhetorical aim. Works of Love has the sub-title "Some Christian Reflections in the Form of Discourses." Reflections, as distinct from edifying discourses, "do not presuppose the qualifying concepts as given and understood," but seek to "awaken and provoke men and sharpen thought" as a preparation for action.<sup>23</sup> In the case of Works of Love, Kierkegaard found it senseless to try to move people to Christian love, because there was no agreement about what that love is: "Therefore, the 'reflections' must first fetch them up out of the cellar, call to them, turn their comfortable way of thinking topsy-turvy with the dialectic of truth."<sup>24</sup> In a similar manner, Part II of Training in Christianity is called "A Biblical Exposition and Christian Definition of Concepts," and develops the concept of "offense" as the negative counterpart of faith. In both works the concepts are developed from a functional standpoint, with regard to the role they play in the life of the believer. Kierkegaard examines "works of love," not the abstract idea of love, and "offense" as the counterpart of faith which

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<sup>22</sup> PV, p. 103.

<sup>23</sup> JP I, #641.

<sup>24</sup> JP I, #641.

relates to personality rather than doubt, which is the intellectual counterpart.

These works indicate two principal aspects of Kierkegaard's "reflections." One is to state as clearly as possible the Christian requirements and their attendant difficulties. He used a wide variety of terms to describe this effort: "to set the task,"<sup>25</sup> "moving by means of the ideals,"<sup>26</sup> to risk offense.<sup>27</sup> The other aspect is that of clarifying our actual practices and presuppositions in the face of these requirements. To put the matter negatively, "The religious address ought essentially to be of such a nature that the listener could acquire the most precise insight into the religious aberration of the contemporary age, and into himself as belonging to the age."<sup>28</sup>

Simple awareness, however, is not the final aim of reflection, nor is even the most precise theological analysis an end in itself, for an atheist can do just as well or even better at that (witness Kierkegaard's appreciation of Feuerbach).<sup>29</sup> There remains the matter of personal appropriation. For all his dialectical precision Kierkegaard was less interested in stating a permanently valid theological position and gaining consensus for it than in helping the reader attain clarity about his or her own operative understanding of Christianity. No better statement of this aim is given than in the concluding words of the preacher in *Either/Or*:

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<sup>25</sup> WL, p. 173.

<sup>26</sup> Papirer, X<sup>6</sup> B 235, cited by Walter Lowrie, Kierkegaard (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), II, 563.

<sup>27</sup> TC, p. 83.

<sup>28</sup> CUP, p. 411.

<sup>29</sup> JP VI, #6523.



Do not check your soul's flight, do not grieve the better promptings within you, do not dull your spirit with half wishes and half thoughts. Ask yourself, and continue to ask until you find the answer. For one may have known a thing many times and attempted it; and yet it is only by the deep inward movements, only by the indescribable emotions of the heart, that for the first time you are convinced that what you have known belongs to you, that no power can take it from you; for only the truth which edifies is truth for you.<sup>30</sup>

#### SELF KNOWLEDGE

A curious feature of the preceding quotation is that the speaker implies a lack of self knowledge on the part of the listener. To be precise, a known self is urged to interrogate a deeper, unknown self. With persistence and sincerity an answer may be coaxed forth by virtue of the "indescribable emotions of the heart." At the same time, this answer is a response to the preacher's discourse on "The Edification Implied in the Thought that as Against God We are Always in the Wrong." One might expect the question to concern the listener's agreement or dissent from the theological position of the discourse. But this is never called into question. What the preacher asks is, "Could you wish it otherwise?" The righteousness of God is presupposed. The essential issue is the relationship the listener takes to this fact. As this discourse implies, theological clarity is the beginning, not the end, of edification. From Kierkegaard's perspective, theological doctrines are entirely equivocal when stated in the abstract. All depends on the way beliefs are held by the believer. (For example, one could conclude from the discourse that it doesn't really matter what we do, since it's all

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<sup>30</sup> E/O II, 356.

wrong anyway.) He focused on how a doctrine functions in the lives of believers, on the ironic twists it receives in collision with other concerns. It is not enough to know the truth, but one must stand in a right relation to the truth. And to do that, it is necessary to know one's relation to the truth—in the Socratic phrase, to know thyself.

Yet for Kierkegaard self-knowledge in the Socratic sense can only be a preliminary to genuine self-knowledge, which is knowledge of the self before God. He follows Calvin here: "No true self-knowledge without God-knowledge."<sup>31</sup> The self before God is a recurrent theme in the discourses, and a central feature of Kierkegaard's anthropology. As early as 1838 Kierkegaard wrote that "union with God" (a Romantic overstatement characteristic of the early Journal entries) is not through a mystical loss of self, "but in an intensified consciousness 'a person must render account for every careless word he has uttered,' and even though grace blots out sin, the union with God still takes place in the personality clarified through this whole process."<sup>32</sup> Kierkegaard here calls for a self examination as thorough as any contemporary psychoanalysis as the necessary counterpart to an encounter with God. "Every careless word" has significance for self-understanding. The clarified personality finds its way into Kierkegaard's definition of the healthy self in The Sickness Unto Death, as a self which is "grounded transparently in the Power which posited it."<sup>33</sup>

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31 JP IV, #3902.

32 JP IV, #3887.

33 SD, p. 147.

The role of Kierkegaard's Christian anthropology in his rhetoric will receive fuller treatment in the next chapter. For the present it is necessary to understand how self-knowledge can be a rhetorical aim. Few preachers can ever claim the intimate knowledge of another person which could interpret to that person "the indescribable emotions of the heart" or account for "every careless word." Even if such knowledge were possible, it still wouldn't be self-knowledge. There is no direct passage from the speaker's awareness to that of the listener, as the Jutland preacher of Either/Or acknowledges: "Perhaps my voice does not possess enough strength and heartiness to penetrate into your inmost thought—O, but ask yourself. . . ."34

Here is the simplest way, then, that a speaker aims at self-knowledge on the part of the listener: a simple directive to "ask yourself." This at least turns a person's attention inward, so that it is facing in the right direction. Direct address to the listener appears frequently throughout the discourses, as here in Purity of Heart: "The talk asks you, then, or you ask yourself by means of the talk, what kind of life do you live, do you will only one thing, and what is this one thing?"35 The constant aim of the discourse is to provide a framework for inwardness "so that [the listener's] life can win the transparency that is a condition for being able to put the question to himself."36

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34 E/O II, 356.

35 PH, p. 182.

36 PH, p. 183.

When self-knowledge is the aim of rhetorical activity, the task of the speaker is not to know the listener so much as to initiate a process of interrogation that can only be completed by each listener. Unlike the context of group deliberation in classical rhetoric, the Christian address does not aim at agreement or consensus, but at an individuation of response. It is necessary, however, that the speaker present the framework of self-dialogue in such a way that the listener can identify with it, as analogous to his or her own inward speech. As Kierkegaard puts it, the speaker must awaken "the preacher within."<sup>37</sup>

Kenneth Burke describes this inward dialogue on the part of a listener in a manner reminiscent of Kierkegaard: "If he does not somehow act to tell himself (as his own audience) what the various brands of rhetorician have told him, his persuasion is not complete. Only those voices from without are effective which can speak in the language of a voice within."<sup>38</sup> Kierkegaard took the process a step further, and asked the readers of For Self-Examination to read aloud, for "By reading aloud thou wilt receive the impression most strongly that thou hast to do here only with thyself. . . ."<sup>39</sup> Only with thyself and God, that is.

Introspective though he was, Kierkegaard abhorred navel-gazing. If the truth is not in us in the Socratic sense, no amount of introspection will find it: "For if self-knowledge does not lead to knowing

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<sup>37</sup> JFY, p. 20.

<sup>38</sup> Kenneth Burke, A Rhetoric of Motives (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), p. 39.

<sup>39</sup> FSE, p. 29.

oneself before God, then indeed . . . it leads to a certain emptiness which produces dizziness."<sup>40</sup> In The Concept of Dread and The Sickness Unto Death, Kierkegaard worked out his position (which then appears consistently in the discourses), that in the absence of a God-relationship human self-understanding inevitably ends in despair. The deeper the self-knowledge, the deeper the despair. The self before God, then. But one cannot simply produce God for the listener, although a preacher may understandably long for just such an occasion. Nor can the speaker replace God directly by saying what "God wants," "God thinks," or "God says." The latter technique is not uncommon among those who are convinced of the literal inerrancy of the Bible, but from Kierkegaard's perspective such presumptions are a verbal form of idolatry.<sup>41</sup>

In the Postscript he satirizes the thought of a direct encounter by supposing "that God should take upon Himself the form of a rare and prodigiously big green bird with a red beak, perching on a tree upon the city rampart, and perhaps chirping in a way totally unheard of"<sup>42</sup>—then one would no doubt take notice. But would a person be any nearer to faith? If the Old Testament is any example, theophanies require faith; they don't produce it. Whether in the form of scripture or of Christian doctrine, in the beauty of nature, or as a big green bird, any objectification of God which bypasses the inwardness of personal appropriation is a form of "paganism."<sup>43</sup> The preacher who takes too

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<sup>40</sup> JFY, p. 122.

<sup>41</sup> Lowrie, II, 305.

<sup>42</sup> CUP, p. 219.

<sup>43</sup> Lowrie, II, 303-05.

direct an approach either encourages idolatry, if the listener is swept along, or makes it all too clear that God, like the emperor's new clothes, is just not objectively there.

There is a style of preaching which subverts the problem by portraying God as a "pal," one's very best friend, perhaps as an idealized, comforting father. By such means one may attain a sense of God's presence, but at about the qualitative level of an imaginary playmate. Kierkegaard points out that, according to the biblical witness, those who really had "personal" relationships with God—patriarchs and apostles—lived in fear and trembling and died exhausted.<sup>44</sup> Kierkegaard also points to the corresponding mistake of speaking as if God were not present in any sense at all, of gossiping about God behind God's back.<sup>45</sup> Those who have tried preaching on "the silence of God" or the theme of deus absconditus may have suffered the pitying glance of the little widow in the front pew, who is "sorry God is not there for you, but I can assure you, He is with me every day." Yet such preaching is at least aware of the problem, unlike that which employs an easy familiarity in talking about God.

Kierkegaard was not interested in a metaphysical debate about the locality of God; he assumed that God is fully omnipresent. Nor did he have much to say about God's action in history or God's presence in the sacraments. It is a matter of priority. If God is not present for the believer in a manner decisive for self-understanding, it does not

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<sup>44</sup> JP II, #1452.

<sup>45</sup> JP III, #3667.

matter for that person where God is; God had just as well not be.

Preaching must always bring the self and God together. Awareness of God without an awareness of self produces idolatry; awareness of self without awareness of God ends in despair.

#### CLEARING FOR ACTION

Knowledge of oneself before God, even in light of the distinctively Christian categories does not yet make one a Christian in the fullest sense. Kierkegaard understood that knowledge does not produce reality; it simply presents a possibility. To know oneself before God, to become contemporaneous with Christ, is to arrive at the possibility of becoming a Christian—by following Christ. Knowledge is only half of the dialectic which constitutes a self. The other half is action. Without action there is properly no real self to know, only a bundle of possibilities, an imaginary self, an imaginary Christian.

By action, Kierkegaard does not mean "activity" or a general business, but "action expressing personal integrity," or "character-action."<sup>46</sup> In this sense we speak of actions which are "characteristic" of a person, the continuity of behavior which is one principle means of coming to know a person, and a means by which a person ought to come to know him/herself. Action thus has an essential educative task: "As soon as a person acts decisively and enters into actuality, then existence can get hold of him and providence can bring him up."<sup>47</sup> And a

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<sup>46</sup> JP I, #15.

<sup>47</sup> JP I, #188.

corrective task: "For if I have ventured amiss—very well, then, life helps me by its punishment. But if I have not ventured at all—who then helps me?"<sup>48</sup>

The educative function of decisive action is especially emphasized in relation to the Christian faith. Kierkegaard rings dozens of variations on the basic theme: "Act according to the command and orders of Christ; do the will of the Father—and you will become a believing person."<sup>49</sup> God's existence is proved by worship;<sup>50</sup> religious doubt is resolved by following Christ.<sup>51</sup> The personal test for any Christian doctrine is the way it can be enacted in one's life:

From the religious point of view, to achieve "actuality" means: without being covered up by a doctrinal objectivity about the believer in general . . . promptly and directly to set one's God-relationship into actuality . . . [saying] I believe this and that, and on the strength of this faith I act in this very concrete instance.

This is how actuality is achieved, this is how the spell is broken, this is how illusions are blasted, and God is able to communicate with actuality.<sup>52</sup>

Because it is founded on the Incarnation, on God's self-communication as a human being, Kierkegaard thinks that Christianity is primarily concerned with the way people live their lives. It is not concerned with cosmologies or metaphysics, or with cultivating special religious attitudes, except insofar as they result in following Christ. For this reason, he calls Christianity an

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<sup>48</sup> SD, p. 167.

<sup>49</sup> JP III, #3023.

<sup>50</sup> CUP, p. 485.

<sup>51</sup> FSE, p. 90.

<sup>52</sup> JP III, #3655.



"existence-communication" or a "communication of capability"<sup>53</sup> in contrast to a communication of knowledge. Some knowledge is required beforehand, of course, but it may be likened to the amount of knowledge required to play tennis. One needs to know the basic pattern of the game and something about the rules, but this is not learning to play tennis. One learns by practice, by playing the game at whatever level one can, and by reflecting on one's performance. Kierkegaard also uses the military example of learning to be a soldier.

The role of the teacher/preacher follows from the analogy. Using one of his favorite aquatic images, Kierkegaard likens the pastor to a swimming teacher. He should not allow his pupils to think that swimming consists of squirming about on dry land; rather he should help them out into the stream.<sup>54</sup> So it is with Christianity; it is learned by doing. That Christianity is primarily a way of life, lived before God, following Christ, provides the final rhetorical aim for Christian discourse: "The prime requisite of the sermon is not to soothe, not to attain a metaphysical standpoint, but to clear for action."<sup>55</sup> The sermon must "unconditionally demand" the listener's "own decisive activity, and all depends upon this."<sup>56</sup>

Clearing for action has a double significance. In one sense it means to remove the inward barriers and impediments to action. The sermon "knows every bypath of error, every secret hiding place, every

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<sup>53</sup> JP I, #651.

<sup>54</sup> JP I, #660, #668.

<sup>55</sup> JP V, #5634.

<sup>56</sup> PH, p. 178.

pathological state on the erring way. . . . [T]he speaker assists us in becoming emancipated from illusions, and knows all about the long and toilsome way, the dangers of relapse. . . ."57 Just as Christian doctrine assumes that all people are sinners, and for precisely this reason, Kierkegaard assumes that everyone is more or less self-deluded. Thus in his discourses Kierkegaard was just as concerned with ferreting out misunderstandings as he was with arriving at a positive conclusion. The conclusion is normally put in the form of a question or a call for a choice about oneself. One could battle illusions theoretically, "beating the air" for years, but nothing dissipates them quite like the moment of decision.

The second aspect of clearing for action, then, is to give the listener something to do. In the Postscript Climacus notes that many sermons are so constructed that it is impossible to give an active response to them. One cannot act on "magnificent world-historical visions," "aesthetic riddles," or "imaginary psychological states." The preacher consoles people with illusions, or "evokes passions such as, at most, they might appear to one who does not have them; or overcomes dangers that are not to be found, leaving the real danger untouched . . . leaving the energies of real life unutilized."58 It is this failure to demand or enable an active response on the part of the listener that Kierkegaard criticizes most strongly in the preaching of

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57 CUP, p. 374n.

58 CUP, p. 396.

his time.<sup>59</sup> His positive requirement is that the sermon be such "that it is possible to act in accordance with it,"<sup>60</sup> and to encourage or demand an honest response from the listener—whether it be a determination to enact the message, an open refusal, or a heartfelt confession that one is simply not willing. Not to do so is to invite confusion and deception, leaving the listener with the impression that Christianity consists of the hearing of sermons. Kierkegaard uses the familiar analogy of the fisherman:

When a fisherman has caught a fish in his net and wishes to keep it alive, what must he do? He must immediately put it in water; otherwise it becomes exhausted and dies after a time. And why must he put it in water? Because water is the fish's element, and everything which shall be kept alive must be kept in its element.<sup>61</sup>

And the preacher must keep Christianity in its proper element, in action and as a way of life.

Not all preaching will call for action in the outward sense of selling all one has to give to the poor or taking up one's cross. The sermon cannot simply skip over the need for concern, careful reflection, and self understanding in order to get people to begin immediately to suffer like Christ. Kierkegaard himself had published ten books and several dozen edifying discourses before he would claim to write from a distinctively Christian viewpoint. But eventually preaching must become a call to action, or it becomes a mere series of prefaces to Christianity, or worse yet, a nostalgia for Christ.

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<sup>59</sup> JP I, #668.

<sup>60</sup> CUP, p. 396.

<sup>61</sup> WL, pp. 175-176.

These, then, are the principal rhetorical aims that Kierkegaard set for his religious authorship—to "inspire with concern and unrest," to set forth clearly the "qualifying concepts" of Christianity in such a way that the reader may gain self understanding by their aid, and then possibly to "venture out" on the dangerous path of following Christ. Christian discourse has had similar concerns from the beginning, and Kierkegaard did not claim to have anything new to contribute in that regard. For Christianity originality is a virtue which is secondary to obedience. Few preachers, however, have labored with such care to clarify and coordinate the intentions of their proclamation.

Two additional factors in Kierkegaard's authorship have been left out of this account, but should not therefore be forgotten. One is the important role of his pseudonymous and aesthetic works in laying the groundwork for the religious. The other is his own inward struggle to keep his personal motives in line with his religious vocation. No one could have been more painfully scrupulous in this regard. Both concerns are suggested in this passage from the Point of View:

The religious writer must, therefore, first get into touch with men. That is, he must begin with aesthetic achievement. This is earnest money. . . . Moreover he must be sure of himself, or (and this is the one and only security) he must relate himself to God in fear and trembling, lest the event most opposite to his intentions should come to pass, and instead of setting the others in motion, the others acquire power over him, so that he ends by being bogged in the aesthetic.<sup>62</sup>

Kierkegaard fought to keep his poetic nature in submission to Christianity, but his observations here point to another danger as well:

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62 PV, p. 26.

the speaker who is not clear about his or her intentions ends simply by serving the intentions of the audience—who no doubt like to be entertained, even by Christianity.

Our concern here has been with Kierkegaard's understanding of the distinctive aims of Christian discourse, that is, those which derive from Christianity itself and become the holy burden of anyone who undertakes to communicate Christianity to another. For this reason it was appropriate to keep the pseudonymous works in the background and to lay Kierkegaard's personal motives aside. But he was his own audience as well, and in this role he may be permitted a final word:

And afterwards when I read it over it satisfies me in quite a different way. For though it may be that one or another glowing expression escapes me, yet the production is quite a different one: it is the outcome, not of the poet's or the thinker's passion, but of godly fear, and for me it is a divine worship.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> PV, p. 68.

## Chapter II

## THE FOUNDATIONS OF ARGUMENT: KIERKEGAARD'S ANTHROPOLOGY

To go before an unknown audience is one of the most difficult situations for a speaker. Yet just such an occasion reveals our presuppositions about communication. Consider, for example, a young woman with a year or so of seminary behind her. She has taken the introductory exegetical and preaching courses, and has preached a few times in class and before her home congregation. But now it is August, and she has a full month of pulpit supply before her, filling in for vacationing pastors. How does she know what to say to these congregations of strangers? She has the Gospel to preach, but to whom, and how?

Her first source of information is probably not very helpful: the pastor, who may have offered a thumbnail sketch over the phone. "Oh, they're good folks, just a little stodgy." "You'll have no problem. It's a really open congregation." "I've been preaching on social issues quite a bit, so I think they're prepared for a woman." She may also gather information on each church's social and economic context, whether suburban or rural, near a retirement community or a university, and she can probably make some guesses about a congregation's general theological outlook from a knowledge of its denominational tradition. All of this information is helpful. It gives her a general sense of the context and limits of her audience.

She is concerned, however, with real people and not with socioeconomic groups or denominations in general. Since she doesn't have a personal acquaintance with her audience, she finds that she has to rely on her basic presuppositions about human nature—her "anthropology"—in order to construct her sermon. If she wants to help them understand themselves as Christians, she needs to have some idea of how self-understanding is achieved. If she wants to urge a decision for a particular course of action, she has to understand how people make decisions.

She may begin to feel that this business of preaching has gotten rather complicated. But there is more. As she begins to write, an imagined crowd of seminary professors appears at her side, examining her work for "theological integrity" and "doing justice to the text." They read everything she says and judge it by the standards of their disciplines. If she manages to shake off these ghosts, she has her own standards to worry about: "Do I really believe this? Who am I to be saying this?" Finally, there is the congregation: "Whether they agree or not, is the sermon clear and consistent enough so that they can understand it?" She realizes that if she is to write an adequate sermon, she will have to put a lot of thought into it.

All of the problems mentioned above have their place in a rhetorical theory. The opinions and perceptions common to a particular social class or age group Aristotle called "topoi" and Cicero called "loci communes"—"commonplaces." These serve the

speaker by providing a context of opinion in view of which the arguments of the speech can be constructed. One would want, for example, to argue differently for disarmament before a group of Quakers than before an audience of retired military personnel. Kierkegaard gave his own distinctive treatment of the subject in The Present Age and in his analysis of "Christendom." This subject will be taken up in the next chapter, on Kierkegaard's dialectic.

The anthropological foundations of rhetoric also have their place in classical treatises. Aristotle gave extensive analyses of the emotions and of various "types" of people, although he assumed a single invariant human motive to which the speaker must ultimately appeal in one way or another, e.g., personal happiness. Quintilian saw rhetoric as the final stage in the education of the ideal human being, the Roman patrician. In both cases, the concept of the human was relatively fixed: a creature who seeks happiness, responds to reason and emotion and makes choices accordingly. Rhetorical theory was then developed on that basis.

With the advent of Christianity, however, the anthropological question is raised anew, with a corresponding effect on rhetoric. Like Augustine before him, Kierkegaard thought that the communication of Christianity could not be served by a rhetoric founded on a mistaken understanding of humanity. He developed a Christian anthropology that would sustain his rhetoric. About his efforts at "anthropological contemplation" he wrote in his journal: "The knowledge of men, the knowledge of the race which I am acquiring, is



not exchangeable for gold, and this is precisely what I needed to illuminate Christianity."<sup>1</sup> The subject of this chapter is a brief exposition of Kierkegaard's anthropology and its foundational role in his rhetoric.

Kierkegaard did not investigate human nature simply in order to be a better communicator. He was more concerned with understanding himself (see the Gilleleie journal entry, and his description of his work as his own "education in Christianity"<sup>2</sup>). Secondly, he wanted to extend philosophical inquiry into an area he felt had been neglected since Socrates: knowledge of the knower, genuine "anthropological contemplation." Third, he had a theological interest in what there is about human nature that makes a relationship to God possible. As an outgrowth of these concerns rhetoric finds its place and escapes sophistry.

Whatever level of abstraction or intellectual rigor Kierkegaard employed in his investigations, he was finally concerned with understanding and influencing existing human beings. His idea of what theory ought to do is consistent with his concern that it have a direct and constant reference to practice. His method was to combine careful observation with introspection, with "reasoning from existence, not toward it."<sup>3</sup> "If only one pays attention to oneself, an observer will, with five men, five women, and ten children have

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<sup>1</sup> JP I, #64.

<sup>2</sup> PV, p. 103.

<sup>3</sup> PF, p. 50.

enough for the discovery of all possible states of the human soul."<sup>4</sup> The insights gained are then put to work rhetorically. Thus he wrote of The Sickness Unto Death that although "it is too dialectical and strict to permit of the employment of rhetoric, of revival, of moving effect . . . the book has enriched me with a capital schema which can always be used for discourses, but without being apparent."<sup>5</sup> Kierkegaard's anthropological schema has both structural and developmental aspects, which are expressed in his concept of the self as a synthesis and in the "stages along life's way."

#### THE SELF AS A SYNTHESIS

Although the idea of the self as a synthesis of body and soul, finite and infinite appears frequently throughout the authorship, Kierkegaard gives a rare definitive statement at the beginning of The Sickness Unto Death. It is probably the single most difficult passage he ever wrote, but here it is:

Man is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation which relates itself to its own self, or it is that in the relation which accounts for it that the relation relates itself to its own self; the self is not the relation but consists in the fact that the relation relates itself to its own self. Man is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short it is a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two factors. So regarded, man is not yet a self.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> CD, p. 112.

<sup>5</sup> SD, p. 135.

<sup>6</sup> SD, p. 146.

In the formula of Sickness Unto Death the self is not the soul-body relation, which Kierkegaard calls a "negative unity," the mere possibility of a self, but when "the relation relates itself to its own self, the relation is then the positive third term, and this is the self."<sup>7</sup> Implied in the "relation to itself" is self-consciousness, for this is the standpoint from which a relation to the soul-body synthesis is possible. Kierkegaard was not unaware of the unconscious aspects of personality, but he understood that they can be incorporated into the self only insofar as they can be brought to consciousness. Otherwise the unconscious guides human life in much the same way that instinct guides an animal. "Spirit" or true selfhood then "is dreaming in man."<sup>8</sup> To be a self is to be conscious of having a self; "the more consciousness, the more self."<sup>9</sup>

Before consciousness, the elements of the synthesis undergo a transformation. At the minimum, it is like turning on a light in a dark room. What once were shadowy masses merged together can now be sharply distinguished. In Kierkegaard's terms, the elements of the synthesis emerge: infinite and finite, temporal and eternal, possibility and necessity. Distinctions can now be made between oneself and one's environment, between the momentary and "the long run," between the ideal and the real. What simply is for the pre-reflective self—my feelings, my home, my job, my

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<sup>7</sup> SD, p. 146.

<sup>8</sup> CD, p. 37.

<sup>9</sup> SD, p. 162.

religion—becomes a set of alternatives for the conscious self. I find myself in a particular life situation, but with an awareness that things could be otherwise, and that responses can become choices. In short, as Judge Wilhelm points out in Either/Or, the Socratic "know thyself" must be completed by "choose thyself."<sup>10</sup> This of course implies a freedom to choose, but Kierkegaard does not posit an empty or arbitrarily free will. He holds with Augustine that "the particular will is not external to but enclosed within the condition in which the person finds himself."<sup>11</sup> Or, as the Judge puts it:

He who has ethically chosen and found himself possesses himself as he is determined in his whole concretion. He has himself, then, as an individual who has these talents, these passions, these inclinations, these habits. . . . Here, then, he has himself as a task, in such a sort that the task is principally to order, cultivate, temper, enkindle, repress, in short to bring about a proportionality in the soul, a harmony, which is the fruit of the personal virtues.<sup>12</sup>

The personality is always discovered in medias res, already possessing a definite history and momentum. Kierkegaard likens it to the progress of a ship where the navigator must account for the ship's headway in order to plot its course.<sup>13</sup> If he hesitates, a new calculation must be made; if he continues to hesitate—well, he is no longer the navigator. In the terms of the analogy, one is no longer (or not yet) a self. With regard to becoming a self, "The choice itself is decisive for the content of the personality."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> E/O II, 263.

<sup>11</sup> Friedrich Bohringer, cited by JP IV, #4047.

<sup>12</sup> E/O II, 266-267.

<sup>13</sup> E/O II, 168.

<sup>14</sup> E/O II, 167.

Every choice is an exercise of finite freedom, a synthesis of possibility and necessity. Every situation limits possibility, and to realize one possibility means that others are rejected. "All things are possible" only when nothing is actual. The temporal/eternal appears in the Judge's phrase, "to choose yourself in your eternal validity,"<sup>15</sup> which is to say, in an essential continuity. The synthesis consists in the way decisions made from moment to moment are related to the unity of an entire lifetime.<sup>16</sup> Only from this perspective does a multiplicity of choices assume the continuity which constitutes a person's character.

That the self takes shape in a continuity of decisions poses the question: by what standards or criteria does the self make its decisions? What is the ground of this continuity? Kierkegaard (Anti-Climacus) points out that "The measure for the self always is that in the face of which it is a self."<sup>17</sup> The Judge maintains that "This self which is the aim is not merely a personal self but a social, a civic self."<sup>18</sup> He grounds the principle of continuity in the ethical concept of duty. Duty in turn is grounded in the social order and legitimated in good Kantian fashion by God. But to turn to a social standard for the integration of the personality is

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<sup>15</sup> E/O II, 215.

<sup>16</sup> Kierkegaard's use of "the eternal" here is similar to Tillich's idea that "Eternity is the transcendent unity of the dissected moments of existential time." Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), I, 274.

<sup>17</sup> SD, p. 211.

<sup>18</sup> E/O II, 267.

essentially a turning back, a turning away from becoming a self to becoming a member of "the race." If the self does not have its integrity in itself, an additive collection of selves will not have it either. In relation to becoming a self the individual/social synthesis stands on the same plane as the soul/body synthesis.

That leaves God, or a god. But not the god which is simply an ethical postulate, a sky-hook on which to hang an ethic. As the concluding sermon of Either/Or suggests, "Before God we are always in the wrong." Ethics may have its own internal consistency, but it does not enable the self to fulfill its demands. The ethical viewpoint is therefore limited by its inability to deal with guilt, as a host of modern psychologists attest. The ethical failure of the self brings the self not only to a logical limit (Kant) but to an existential limit. The self becomes aware that it is not self-constituted, and that to be a self is to stand "in relation to the Power which constituted it." Thus we have Kierkegaard's formula for the healthy self: "by relating itself to its own self and by willing to be itself the self is grounded transparently in the Power which posited it."<sup>19</sup>

This is a theological anthropology; the healthy state requires a relation to God. At this point one may suspect a circularity in Kierkegaard's development of the self. He is concerned with nurturing the Christian's God-relationship, so he defines the human condition in such a way that it needs one. But it may also be that Kierkegaard

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<sup>19</sup> SD, p. 147.

uses the term "power" rather than "God" in the formula because he does not refer to a specific god, just as he uses "the God" in Philosophical Fragments, "the good" in Purity of Heart, and "the eternal" in the edifying discourses. These terms do not name a particular being but identify the human standpoint from which the god-relationship is approached. Many Christians make the same use of the persons of the Trinity. "Power" is a god-term expressing a particular function in Kierkegaard's view of self-consciousness--the common human awareness that we are not self-created. For an understanding of oneself that is whole and authentic, the question of origin of self is essential. It is by an honest, "transparent" answer to this question that wholeness is achieved. The Power may be fate for the pagan or Yahweh for the Jew, so that having attained this "transparent grounding" one has not thereby become a Christian. It is a long journey from the Power to the God of Jesus Christ. The self has simply reached a psychological point of equilibrium--a rudimentary "faith."

When faith has this role it is the central expression of one's identity. Kierkegaard holds that to the degree one attains an awareness of being before God, God is the primary principle of individuation against which the self takes its distinctive shape. He applied this insight to himself in the famous Gilleleie journal entry. He wrote: without yet achieving self-knowledge "I have, with profound respect for its significance, tried to preserve my individuality

—worshipped the unknown God."<sup>20</sup> As Anti-Climacus says, "The more conception of God, the more self; the more self, the more conception of God;" or "As thou believest, so art thou; to believe is to be."<sup>21</sup> This is not to say that a person's life will directly express such belief, or that one's relations to the various god-terms will be consistent with one another. "On the contrary, here begins a very prolix story."<sup>22</sup>

This story is told in rich detail in Kierkegaard's psychology of anxiety and despair, but always within the basic pattern or structure of the self which he describes at the beginning of The Sickness Unto Death. Yet the orderliness of his presentation should not be taken to imply that Kierkegaard thought the development of a human self follows a unilinear order. As he wrote in his journal, "A life which is not clear about itself inevitably displays an uneven surface."<sup>23</sup> A person grows or atrophies on many fronts at once, and rarely in co-ordination. Transparency in one aspect of self-hood is accompanied by befuddlement and deception in others. It is a hard journey just to discover the self as a task and to become conscious of one's patterns of feeling, habits, and beliefs. To bring these fragments of a self in relation to one another before God, while the conception of the God before whom one stands shifts and undergoes revision, this is harder still. Kierkegaard's anthropology is helpful

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<sup>20</sup> JP V, #5100.

<sup>21</sup> SD, p. 224.

<sup>22</sup> SD, p. 224.

<sup>23</sup> JP V, #5100.



not in its simplification but because it provides a variety of viewpoints from which to deal with the complexities of the self. The self can be understood by the quality of awareness, the nature of its conflicts, the way it is revealed in the moment of choice and in its overall pattern of choices. And we know it by its relationship to God.

#### THE STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT

Kierkegaard offers yet another perspective on the self in his concept of the stages of life. If the synthesis describes the structure within which the self develops, the stages describe the developmental process itself, but with one important qualification. Because human growth depends upon the quality of self-consciousness and its enactment in decision, there is not an inevitable progression from one stage to another. There is always the possibility of retrogression. Viewed from within, each stage can be seen as an "alternative life-style." In Kierkegaard's phrase, it is a "sphere of existence" which strives to comprehend the world fully from its own definite perspective. It may not have an inkling what comes next unless it runs up against its own limitations, and then only if it is willing to "venture out."

The three stages, then, are the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious (with Christianity as a possible fourth). Between aesthetics and ethics, irony forms a boundary zone, as does humor between the ethical and the religious.

### The Aesthetic

We are all born aesthetes in Kierkegaard's use of the term. The aesthetic is not a theory of art appreciation; it is an orientation to life characterized by an attitude of observation (as the Greek root implies) and by the "dialectic" of pleasure and pain. The child seeks pleasure and avoids pain, and its mental life at its peak is dominated by curiosity. A child displays imagination and creativity in its quest for pleasurable experiences and equal resourcefulness in the avoidance of pain. Much of its mental activity is directed toward these ends, but a fair amount of "thought" seems to have no other purpose than the exercise of the child's growing abilities, as when a child repeats words and phrases or the simple activities it has just learned.

Kierkegaard's aesthete is not unlike a perpetual child, or rather an adult whose character is frozen in the categories of the child. He remains within the pleasure/pain dialectic, cultivating it to its limits. At the simplest level this is hedonism. For most people hedonism fails as a way of life because it depends on the body as the organ of sensual pleasure and on sufficient means to supply what is pleasant. One gets sick, injured, or simply grows old—or runs out of money. Therefore as a test case of the inward boundaries of the aesthetic, Kierkegaard posits the aesthete as a rich young man. For all his outward advantages, when we meet "A" in the first part of Either/Or he is already at the end of his rope. For this reason he is in an excellent position to reflect on the aesthetic stage.

Although one may suppose that A has taken his share of the "pleasure of the flesh," he has also cultivated the "higher pleasures" of art and philosophy. Simple pleasure-seeking is reflectively transmuted into style and taste, as is his approach to life's pains. A has advanced beyond the hedonist in that he has discovered that "The essence of pleasure does not lie in the thing enjoyed, but in the accompanying consciousness." But in the same breath he reveals his likeness to the child: "pleasure consists not in what I enjoy, but in having my own way."<sup>24</sup> A has explored the possibility of pure sensuality in Don Juan, the "sensuous genius." He has learned to extract pleasure from pain in contemplation of the tragic, sorrow, and death. His crowning achievement is to derive satisfaction from style itself, as in "the rotation method" and the art of seduction.

A has explored the realm of the aesthetic in and for itself with his own bizarre kind of integrity, and what has it brought him? Boredom and depression. Wine and women have long since lost their attraction, and even song is failing him. His powerful intellect has "lost its thread" and begun to unravel. As the Judge says, his mind is like "a clown whose joints are so limber that all necessity for maintaining the human gait and posture is done away. Such are you in an intellectual sense, you can just as well stand on your head as on your feet, everything is possible for you. . . ."<sup>25</sup> He cannot realize himself in decisions because he wants to keep all his options open,

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<sup>24</sup> E/O I, 30.

<sup>25</sup> E/O II, 16.

but also because he sees no real alternatives. All is vanity. His passions are thoroughly burnt out, nothing appeals to him: "I do not care to lie down, for I should either have to remain lying, and I do not care to do that, or I should have to get up again, and I do not care to do that either. Summa Summarum: I do not care at all."<sup>26</sup> A has run up against the irony that satisfaction is not ultimately satisfying. In the pursuit of happiness he has become "the Unhappiest Man."

The irony in A's viewpoint is the indication that he has reached the limits of the aesthetic, for irony is an expression of limitation and inner contradiction. Kierkegaard does not see irony as a clever way of speaking tongue-in-cheek but as "an existential determinant" in which the self-defeating character of the aesthetic life comes to expression. Irony comes to the aesthete's service by bringing the contradictory presuppositions of his life into relation with one another. He begins to "relate himself to himself." He raises the possibility of change, but without necessarily indicating what that change may be. Socratic irony, the irony of the ethicist, helps to define the alternative by exposing the aesthete's existence in the name of a higher possibility. As we will see, this is precisely the function of Kierkegaard's rhetoric of irony.

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<sup>26</sup> E/O I, 20.

### The Ethical

Kierkegaard does not present "an ethic" as such. Even his Works of Love is more a psychology of Christian ethics than an ethic. From the anthropological perspective he focuses on the ethical as an aspect of human development. Like the aesthetic, the ethical displays its own hierarchy. At the minimum it is sociality, the individual's relations in the community, the way character is revealed and takes shape in public activity. As the Judge says, "It is every man's duty to become revealed."<sup>27</sup> Insofar as the ethical is simply a function of ethos, a reflection of the values and interests of a social group, or insofar as ethics is an expression of self-interest, it tends toward the aesthetic. Right and wrong are reduced to a matter of taste or utility. "Good taste" in a culture can become an aesthetic version of the knowledge of good and evil by which a person can gain a position analogous to virtue without having to submit to the rigors of the ethical.

At the maximum the ethical expresses the ideal possibilities for human life and lays upon a person the obligation to realize the ideal in his or her own life. Ethics at this level entails the recognition of transpersonal and trans-social values which leave behind the dialectic of pleasure and pain and take up the dialectic of good and evil. In terms of the synthesis, infinity takes a definite

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<sup>27</sup> E/O II, 327.

shape. The mass of possibilities for human life are given order and direction, and the succession of moments enters history.

Although Kierkegaard presents a number of aesthetic characters since there is no real unity in the aesthetic viewpoint, he needs only one representative ethicist, Judge Wilhelm, a true Everyman. The Judge has a respectable job (he is actually an assessor), a doting wife, and a well-kept home. He is the sort of model citizen that fills the pews of thousands of Protestant churches. His is a well-ordered life in which God, country, and family fit together in harmony.

Perhaps it is too harmonious. Missing from the Judge's account is any sense of the conflicts which really put ethics to the test. His domestic happiness is clearly founded on his wife's submissiveness. The rightness of his job depends upon the rectitude of the state which employs him, and he doesn't really consider the possibility of a religious duty that would conflict with his civic and familial duties. Yet real life is full of such conflicts. One begins to suspect that the Judge is living in as much of a dream world as A.

With the introduction of conflict the ethical sphere begins to break down, both outwardly and inwardly. Situations arise where whatever one does is wrong. Kierkegaard frequently appeals to the case of an "unhappy love," where to fulfill the relationship would spell disaster for one or both of the lovers. One becomes involved in a maze of casuistry, excuses, and extenuating circumstances. The force of the ethical demand is dissipated; it "dies the death of a

thousand qualifications." To paraphrase the aesthete's dilemma: "It would be wrong to lie down; it would be wrong to get up. Summa Summarum: It would be wrong."

The inward conflict is one of motives. The Judge has fulfilled the ethical ideal in marriage, or so he thinks, and it has also made him happy. He claims to have found "the equilibrium of the aesthetical and the ethical" in his marriage. But his rectitude and his happiness are bought at the price of his wife's full humanity. Rather than an equilibrium, one suspects the Judge of a confusion between the good and the pleasant, which is to say, hypocrisy. As Kierkegaard puts it, "Hypocrisy is as inseparable from being a man as sliminess from being a fish."<sup>28</sup> One sets forth the good but hides the evil that was done to attain it. One wants to do the good, but also expects to be rewarded for it. The worst elements of the aesthetic are covered over and given new vitality by their misappropriation in the ethical.

When the ambiguities of ethical situations and the inward contradictions of the existing individual are brought together, the ethical stage reaches its limit. The problem is not that the ethical ideals themselves are invalidated, but that the person is invalidated—which is to say, guilty. And the ethical cannot remove guilt. Its function is as its representative's title implies, to judge. If ethics tries to forgive, it simply cancels itself out. A

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<sup>28</sup> JP II, #2053.

person who is guilty has found that his or her actions have contradicted or violated some deeply held value. The guilt can be removed only by rejecting one's values, which is the self-cancellation of ethics, or by seeking forgiveness. One has reached the boundary of the religious: "To believe in the forgiveness of sins is the decisive crisis whereby a human being becomes spirit."<sup>29</sup>

That the person in the ethical sphere ends in contradiction also means that he or she comes under the category of the humorous. In both boundary zones of irony and humor the perspective of the higher stage impinges on the lower to expose its contradictions. The difference is that irony is a form of judgment in that it lays on the burden of the ethical, but humor is grace. At least it brings a gracious possibility, for to be able to laugh at oneself is a form of confession. The only alternative is to be offended.

Kierkegaard makes extensive use of humor and irony in his authorship. There is a good case for taking the whole of the Concluding Unscientific Postscript as the work of a humorist.<sup>30</sup> The important point is not that he was witty, however. His wit, like his poetic spirit, was as much a problem to his religious vocation as an asset. In his journal he relates that he was so witty and so much the life of the party one evening that he wanted to go home and shoot himself.<sup>31</sup> Kierkegaard saw humor as an essential anthropological and

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<sup>29</sup> JP I, #67.

<sup>30</sup> CUP, p. 404.

<sup>31</sup> JP V, #5141.



religious element, and he sought to use it accordingly in his authorship. If hypocrisy is a human inevitability, so is humor; it is a consequence of our synthetic nature. That "we have this treasure in earthen vessels" Kierkegaard sees as "a flight of genuine humor."<sup>32</sup>

### The Religious

For one who announced the "infinite qualitative difference" between God and humanity, it is strange that the religious stage could be expressed as an aspect of anthropology. But Kierkegaard made careful distinctions between Christianity and a general human capacity for religiousness. The distinctively Christian element will be considered in a later chapter. Here we are concerned with what Kierkegaard called "religiousness A," the relation to an immanent god as an anthropological determinant. Religiousness is the issue here, and not a particular religion, in that Kierkegaard seeks a general description of the self before God. Christianity is no doubt a particular case of religiousness. But in Kierkegaard's view it turns the whole process around by confronting the individual with the "absolute paradox" of God in time, the God-man, Christ.

If the ethical stage corresponds to that aspect of the synthesis in which the self is "willing to be itself," the religious stage concerns the inward process by which the self is "grounded transparently in the Power which posits it." As we saw in the

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<sup>32</sup> JP I, #797.

discussion of the synthesis, Kierkegaard thinks if one looks deeply enough or proceeds far enough on the path of becoming a self, one finds that the self requires God. As the title of one of the edifying discourses puts it, "Man's need of God constitutes his highest perfection." This is the other side of "before God we are always in the wrong." In relation to both the ethical and the aesthetic, Johannes Climacus gives this definition of religiousness in the Postscript: "The totality of guilt-consciousness in the particular individual before God in relation to an eternal happiness is religiousness."<sup>33</sup> Here the failed righteousness of the ethical stage and the failed quest for happiness of the aesthetic stage are brought together before God and realigned. The religious life begins in the combination of the deepest self-condemnation and the most intense self-interest.

Kierkegaard describes the general characteristics of religiousness in the Postscript under the rubric of "existential pathos" as an expression for the profound concern and continual striving which characterizes the religious life. The "Initial Expression" is that one seeks to maintain in one's life "an absolute relationship to the absolute telos and a relative relation to relative ends."<sup>34</sup> In H. Richard Niebuhr's phrase, it is the relationship to a "center of value" to which all other values are held responsible. Kierkegaard took the case to a polemical extreme in the "teleological

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<sup>33</sup> CUP, p. 492.

<sup>34</sup> CUP, p. 347.

suspension of the ethical" of Fear and Trembling. But he made his point that God is the final judge over all human values, even the ones we think God has established. The frightening thing about Abraham's situation is that it is potentially the case for all of us. "What it means to be human," Kierkegaard writes, is "To be capable of a God-relationship . . . for which every earthly order may and must at times be opposed."<sup>35</sup>

According to Kierkegaard Abraham came away from his experience feeling "forever at variance" with what it ordinarily means to be human.<sup>36</sup> The absolute telos means a "dying away from the world" as the measure for one's life. This in itself is suffering. It means saying good-bye to one's self, and this is the essential religious expression of suffering: "God dwells in a contrite heart."<sup>37</sup> This suffering is not self-torture, "flagellations and the like,"<sup>38</sup> but a clearing-away of the old self to make room for the new self which is beginning.

And he that never went weeping to bed, weeping, not because he could not sleep, but because he did not dare to remain longer awake; and he that never endured to the end the suffering of the impotence felt when making a beginning; and he that was never struck dumb, he at least should never take it upon himself to talk about the religious sphere, but remain where he belongs—in the sleeping chamber, in the trading shop, in the tittle-tattle of the street.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> TC, p. 92.

<sup>36</sup> JP III, #3714.

<sup>37</sup> CUP, p. 399.

<sup>38</sup> CUP, p. 414.

<sup>39</sup> CUP, p. 434.

Religious suffering in no way precludes happiness; it brings it into relation with the essential task. There is joy in knowing that the suffering is an indication of one's relation to God, and all enjoyment becomes an expression of this relation: "And why does he enjoy himself? Because it is the humblest expression for his God-relationship to admit his humanity, and because it is human to enjoy oneself."<sup>40</sup> Without this understanding God becomes "a jealous and stupid despot."<sup>41</sup>

The "Decisive Expression" for the religious pathos is that the totality of one's past life is brought before God under the consciousness of guilt. This is not simply a morbid desire to repent of each "sin," no matter how minor or remote. The consciousness of sin itself is "higher than the most enthusiastic penance which one would make up for the guilt."<sup>42</sup> The integral recollection of guilt accomplishes three things. It fulfills "the requirement of existence: to put things together."<sup>43</sup> The consciousness of guilt brings the whole of one's life under judgment, but precisely in doing so it brings the possibility of making life whole. Second, it recalls a person to freedom, since guilt, even though it is the negation of freedom, nonetheless presupposes it.<sup>44</sup> Finally, the comprehensive

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<sup>40</sup> CUP, pp. 440-441.

<sup>41</sup> CUP, p. 441.

<sup>42</sup> CUP, p. 479.

<sup>43</sup> CUP, p. 473.

<sup>44</sup> CUP, p. 475.

awareness of guilt brings one to a genuine fear of God.<sup>45</sup> Which, as everyone knows, is the beginning of wisdom.

Given the preceding exposition, Kierkegaard's summary of religiousness A may now make some sense:

Religiousness A is the dialectic of inward transformation; it is the relation to an eternal happiness which is not conditioned by anything but is the dialectic inward appropriation of the relationship, and so is conditioned only by the inwardness of the appropriation and its dialectic.<sup>46</sup>

That the relation "is not conditioned by anything" indicates that at this point Kierkegaard does not have the God of any particular religious tradition in mind, although his categories certainly bear the marks of the Judeo-Christian. He is summarizing the quality of relation to God as the highest expression of human selfhood. The anthropology culminates in three god-functions: creator of the synthesis, source of happiness (the aesthetic), and absolute telos (the ethical). Each of the preceding stages is incorporated and finds fulfillment in the religious stage.

For Kierkegaard it is not reason or language but the individual's capacity to relate to God that is the specific difference, the most distinctive characteristic of the human. "Every human life is planned religiously."<sup>47</sup> He believes that one can have a relationship to God only as an individual—whether one is in the company of others or not is beside the point for him. Kierkegaard can

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<sup>45</sup> CUP, p. 494.

<sup>46</sup> CUP, p. 494.

<sup>47</sup> CD, p. 94.

also state that the individual is higher than the race.<sup>48</sup> Animal species are related to God as creator of the species, and each specimen is interchangeable with the others. By contrast, humans are fully realized only in the process of individuation and by that process contribute something new to the species.<sup>49</sup> And true individuation comes as a result of the relationship to God. That comparatively few fully attain such a relationship is not for Kierkegaard an abrogation of the principle, but simply a sign that for many people, "in their own house they prefer to live in the cellar."<sup>50</sup> Kierkegaard measures humanity by its maximum possibility rather than by the lowest common denominator.

Far from giving an elitist definition, Kierkegaard bases his understanding of equality on the relationship to God. Since before God each person has to do with his or her own self, the task is precisely equal for all, and in principle attainable by all. To be intelligent means to find more intellectual problems with which to wrestle; to be simple means to find fewer. The task is different—more elaborate and more sophisticated—for a professional theologian than for a lay person, but essentially it is neither harder nor easier. To the degree that Kierkegaard was himself an elitist he is judged by his own theology.

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<sup>48</sup> JP II, #2071.

<sup>49</sup> CD, p. 31. Cf. Gregor Malantschuk, Kierkegaard's Thought (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 259.

<sup>50</sup> SD, p. 176.

That the individual's relation to God is the distinctive human characteristic forms a paradox. What can occur only for an individual is also what most deeply unites us. This in turn is the religious foundation of ethics. "Everyone who bases his life on something accidental leads a robber-existence, be it upon beauty, wealth, background, science, art—in short, upon anything which cannot be every man's fate."<sup>51</sup> It is an expression of what Kierkegaard calls the "qualitative dialectic" that becoming an individual is precisely the opposite of attaining worldly distinction. It is the religious-ethical task to find in the other person and express in one's relations to him or her "the inner glory of equality."<sup>52</sup>

#### RHETORICAL APPLICATIONS

Kierkegaard's anthropology is not easy to grasp or describe as a unified theory. He did not present it as such and discouraged any attempts at a neat systematization. Human existence is not a system. Yet there is in Kierkegaard's work a guiding viewpoint, a matrix of perspectives that is employed so consistently in the authorship that an understanding of Kierkegaard's rhetoric would be impossible without it. As we seek out the rhetorical uses of this anthropology we will go back over the same ground from a different perspective. Kierkegaard's authorship, including the journals, is simultaneously a development of his ideas and an act of persuasion. Even his most

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<sup>51</sup> JP I, #885.

<sup>52</sup> WL, p. 96.

fundamental anthropological concepts have a rhetorical thrust. Before turning to the use Kierkegaard makes of his anthropology in his rhetoric we should note two rhetorical elements that are a part of the anthropology itself.

### Persuasive Definition

Aside from its explanatory power, Kierkegaard's definition of the human as "spirit" serves as the warrant for his enterprise as a religious author. Analysts of culture may choose homo faber, while rationalists may rest content with homo sapiens or homo rationis. (Rhetoricians, of course, are fond of homo symbolicis or homo rhetoricis.) The choice of the qualifier homo focuses attention on the particular aspect of human life that the writer wants to place at the center. It is a persuasive definition.<sup>53</sup>

Persuasive definitions can be either normative or more narrowly argumentative. The normative definition places all other aspects of what is to be defined in a subordinate relationship to the central defining characteristic. Thus homo faber and homo rationis are not eliminated as descriptive of the human but play a subordinate role to homo religiosus. Kierkegaard's shift from "I think, therefore I am" to "To believe is to be" is just such a normative definition.

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<sup>53</sup> See Charles L. Stevenson, "Persuasive Definitions", in Martin Steinmann, ed., New Rhetorics (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967), p. 215; and Chaim Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, The New Rhetoric (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), pp. 210-214.



It means that all anthropological discussion must proceed from or return to the religious dimension. Kierkegaard is thus in a position when arguing for faith to urge people to become what they essentially are or must be. This is easier than asking them to become something alien to their true nature. Normative definition is a way of stating presuppositions, of "defining the terms" of argument. "A" provides a wry example in "The Rotation Method":

Starting from a principle is affirmed by people of experience to be a very reasonable procedure; I am willing to humor them, and so begin with the principle that all men are bores. Surely no one will prove himself so great a bore as to contradict me in this.<sup>54</sup>

From A's perspective "man the boring" is a normative definition. It is his actual conclusion about the nature of human existence. From Kierkegaard's perspective it is a definition of the second type.

Argumentative definition selects from the defining characteristics that which is to be applied in a given situation. Boredom is an aspect of all human life, but it summarizes the life of the aesthete. Consider the term "spirit." When Kierkegaard wants to emphasize reflection, he gives one definition: "Spirit is the power a person's understanding exercises over his life."<sup>55</sup> Or, to emphasize passion: "Spirit is fire."<sup>56</sup> Or suffering: "Spirit is: to live as if dead (to die to the world)."<sup>57</sup> Each is an assertion given the form

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<sup>54</sup> E/O I, 281.

<sup>55</sup> JP IV, #4340.

<sup>56</sup> JP IV, #4355.

<sup>57</sup> JP IV, #4360.

of a definition. It does not exhaust the meanings of spirit, but achieves intensity by linking the term to a more concrete referent or a specific aspect of human experience.

### Abstract/Concrete

Kierkegaard's concept of the self as synthesis is built around abstract terms: infinite/finite, possibility/necessity, temporal/eternal. The reader who has struggled to make sense of them will appreciate Sartre's comment that "not one of these combinations of words is intelligible, but . . . they constitute, by the very negation of every effort to know them, a reference to what grounds the effort."<sup>58</sup> Kierkegaard's use of these terms is unintelligible if, like Sartre, one attempts to do away with their reference to the God-relationship. But Sartre is right in noting that the terms call one back to oneself in order to supply an existential analogue—not as much to understand the concepts as to understand oneself by their aid. They are like signposts pointing inward. Kierkegaard says as much in The Concept of Dread: "Inwardness is therefore eternity, or the determinant of the eternal in a man."<sup>59</sup> It is not a particular concept of the eternal which is at issue here. Kierkegaard could just as well have used "the infinite," as he does elsewhere. It is the quality of the reader's own subjectivity. Kierkegaard wrote in such a

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<sup>58</sup> J.P. Sartre, "The Singular Universal," in Josiah Thompson, ed., Kierkegaard (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972), p. 258.

<sup>59</sup> CD, p. 134.

manner as to avoid giving his anthropological terms a univocal meaning, so that the reader is forced to understand them existentially. Consistent with this purpose, his characteristic method of elucidating a concept is through the dramatis personae of the pseudonymous works.

Like the argumentative definition, the use of abstract terms does not convince the reader by force of rational demonstration. The definition proceeds by narrowing the viewpoint, saying, "This is how it is." It asks the reader to verify the assertion in his or her own experience. The abstract is expansive, suggestive, asking the reader to supply the definition. Even terms with the most concrete referents can be used in this abstract manner:

The abstract can produce a prodigious effect. If I say in a talk: There where the road turns, there by the gate where the hired man stands—pure abstractions: there, road, turns, gate, hired man.

The gate can be a hundred thousand gates; the hired man can be millions.

This is the eternal one of the imagination. Just like the eternal "once upon a time" of the imagination: then man goes out into the morning of life.<sup>60</sup>

Kierkegaard employs this open-ended, imaginative quality of abstraction in the presentation of his anthropology. The abstract is used not only to gain clarity or philosophical precision, but also to gain maximum applicability and to invite participation. There are other reasons why Kierkegaard can be difficult to read, but this one is intentional. He wants to make you work, so that it is necessary to

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<sup>60</sup> JP I, #4.

understand yourself in order to understand him. As Walker Percy summarized his struggle with Kierkegaard, "Strangely enough, the harder you work at it the more important it seems to be to you when you finally do understand what he is getting at."<sup>61</sup> Kierkegaard's is a participatory anthropology.

#### Spiritual Equality: The Universal Locus Communis

For any speaker to persuade an audience there must be some common ground, some initial agreements from which the speaker's arguments can proceed. These may be shared values, opinions, or needs, and are called loci in the rhetorical tradition. The more widely shared the loci, the larger a speaker's potential audience, until those loci which are held to be common among all people form the basis of a universal audience. The principles of logic are perhaps the most common contenders for universality among Western audiences, which corresponds to the conception of the human as homo rationis. Loci can also be prescriptive; the locus can indicate what ought to be the terms of agreement. Appeals to "reason" do not necessarily assume that all people make decisions on a strictly rational basis, but that they should.

As we have indicated, Kierkegaard subordinates reason to the relationship to God as the universal locus. The reality of God is never in question for Kierkegaard; it forms what E.D. Klemke calls an

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<sup>61</sup> Bradley R. Dewey, "Walker Percy talks about Kierkegaard," Journal of Religion, 54 (1974), 279.

"absolute presupposition."<sup>62</sup> Kierkegaard rejects any proofs of God as "treason" because they subordinate God to the presuppositions of the proof, in which case some conception of reason is back on the throne. In Kierkegaard's view to be human is to have or to seek a relationship to God. Such relationship ought to be of concern to every potential audience and to every individual. Spiritual equality means that the task is of concern to everyone and equal for everyone, and that before God all people are of equal value.

In traditional rhetorical terminology Kierkegaard has combined the locus of quantity (what is most common to all) with the locus of quality (the highest human achievement) in the locus of equality (the highest as equally possible for all). The rhetorical advantage gained by this position is that it provides a universal basis for religious discourse, a common ground which underlies every cultural and personal particularity. Whether one becomes a Christian or not, Kierkegaard sees an anthropological justification for a confrontation with the religious question.

The equality and universality of the human need for faith is the underlying theme of Kierkegaard's first published edifying discourse, "The Expectation of Faith." The occasion is New Year's Day, and Kierkegaard reflects on the practice of extending good wishes to people for the coming year. There is a difficulty in knowing what to wish for someone: "There is mention of worldly goods, of health,

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<sup>62</sup> E.D. Klemke, Studies in the Philosophy of Kierkegaard (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1976), pp. 48ff.

good times, wealth, power, fortune, a glorious fame; and the listener is warned against them; for he who has them is warned not to trust in them; he who does not have them is warned not to set his heart upon them."<sup>63</sup> Kierkegaard concludes that the only thing one could wish for every person without exception is faith:

. . . it is not only the highest good, but it is a good in which all can share; and he who rejoices in his possession of it rejoices on behalf of countless generations of men; "for what I possess," he says, "that every man possesses or may possess. . . . for that quality by virtue of which a man has faith is not one in which he is different from another man, but that wherein he is identical with him."<sup>64</sup>

Kierkegaard adheres strictly to this principle of equality throughout his discourses. In "Every Good and Perfect Gift is from Above" he argues that all are equally gifted because all true gifts are from God. The three discourses of The Lilies of the Field all elaborate the theme of "our common humanity." Training in Christianity concludes with seven discourses emphasizing the universality of Christ's call: "He will draw all unto Himself."

If the locus of equality includes all in the religious task, it also relativizes the differences between people. When Kierkegaard speaks of anxiety in the Christian Discourses, "The Anxiety of Poverty" is followed by "The Anxiety of Abundance," "The Anxiety of Lowliness" is balanced by "The Anxiety of Highness," "presumption" by "self-torment." In each case the intellectual, socioeconomic, and psychological factors that divide people are coordinated with the

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<sup>63</sup> ED I, 9.

<sup>64</sup> ED I, 10.

essential equality of each person before God. Each earthly distinction has its own distinctive problems, its own possibilities for corruption, as Kierkegaard argues in Works of Love:

It is corruption when the poor man shrivels up in his poverty so that he lacks the courage to will to be built up in Christianity. It is also corruption when a prominent man wraps himself in his prominence in such a way that he shrinks from being built up by Christianity. And it is also corruption if he whose distinction is to be like the majority of people never comes out of this distinction through Christian elevation.<sup>65</sup>

By keeping to the locus of equality Kierkegaard leaves no one out of his discourses. The listener/reader cannot say "this doesn't concern me" or make excuses due to his/her own peculiar circumstances. Kierkegaard does not argue that all earthly distinctions are to be ignored, but that they form the standpoint from which equality is to be expressed. Religiously considered, being rich or poor, young or old, is equivocal. Each distinction presents exactly as many impediments as opportunities. Human differences must "hang loosely" like an actor's costume. Just as it would be madness for an actor to continue the role offstage, so it is madness to confuse oneself with one's earthly distinctions.<sup>66</sup> The ethical task is, in spite of the distinctions, "to will to exist equally for every human being without exception"—to love one's neighbor.<sup>67</sup>

The locus of equality is Kierkegaard's solution to the rhetorical problem of how to be as inclusive as possible without

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<sup>65</sup> WL, p. 85.

<sup>66</sup> WL, pp. 95-96.

<sup>67</sup> WL, p. 92.

becoming trivial, and how to speak to the individual without becoming exclusive. In his discourses there is a remarkable openness. There is an absence of a sense of "us against them" or of speaking to a segment of the audience while the others are left as spectators. This universality is all the more remarkable for one who addressed himself to "the single individual."

#### Freedom and Persuasion

All persuasion implies to some extent a freedom to respond to the message. Classical rhetoric flourished under Athenian democracy and the Roman Republic but went into sharp decline under the Empire when political freedoms were constricted. Rhetoric became ornamental, a performing art rather than the art of deliberation over the political future. The possibilities for persuasion are limited by the freedom of the audience, whether it is a freedom from external restraints or the speaker's own conception of what their freedom is and ought to be. Predestinarians focus on attitude and obedience to the sovereign will of God, while Free Will Baptists seek a decision for Jesus Christ.

Kierkegaard's anthropology allows him to see freedom in its relation to the personality and not simply as a postulate required to get people to become Christians. If "choice is decisive for the content of the personality," a person's character is subject to being shaped by persuasion, insofar as persuasion is aimed at guiding one's choices. The responses Kierkegaard elicits are presented in the



context of the reader's own struggle with him/herself rather than as a disembodied "yea" or "nay" to the propositions of the discourse. The self as a synthesis of freedom and necessity means that both elements are present in any situation. The existential constraints on a person do not eliminate freedom. They give it shape and definition which the speaker must take into account.

The personal context of freedom is indicated in Kierkegaard's observations on repentance. Repentance is not a feeling of remorse, which only sorrows over sin without changing anything. It is a painstaking process of extricating oneself from the toils of sin.<sup>68</sup> In sin a person "forges the chains of his bondage with the strength of his freedom . . . and all his powers unite to make him the slave of sin."<sup>69</sup> To repent does not suddenly strike off the chains. The nature of sin is that it becomes a part of the structure of one's character, which must then be re-formed in repentance. One must employ as much energy in regaining freedom as one did in losing it. Kierkegaard speaks of going back by the way you come or, in an image from folklore, "playing the tune backwards" to break the spell.<sup>70</sup> The development or degeneration of the personality constitutes the arena in which freedom is active and each decision either limits or expands freedom's possibilities.

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<sup>68</sup> CD, pp. 102-103.

<sup>69</sup> PF, p. 21.

<sup>70</sup> JP IV, #3996.

Freedom thus has a personal history which the discourse must respect. By focussing on moments of decision and crises, Kierkegaard illuminates the points at which the self is "made." By keeping decision within the context of a life-history, he maintains the continuity which is implied in edification—"upbuilding."

### The Stages as a Structure of Motives

"Faith" is perhaps the most common Christian expression for a person's relationship to God. Yet it is an extremely difficult term to get hold of. Few Christians are likely to hold the same definition of faith in common. Even for a single person a clear understanding of faith is difficult. This is in part because we have heard it used in so many diverse ways, but also because faith has had different meanings for us at various points in our own personal histories. Some of these meanings we may want to reject as misunderstandings, while others retain their validity but just don't seem significant in our present situation. A speaker whose aim is to elicit faith must take account of these varied meanings.

One way of sorting out the multiplicity of meanings is to focus on the question of motive. As Kenneth Burke indicates,

Any over-all term for motivation, such as honor, loyalty, liberty, equality, fraternity, is a summing up of many motivational strands. And though on its face it reduces a whole complexity of terms to one apparently simple term, the people who used it may have been quite aware of many other meanings subsumed in it, but not explicitly proclaimed.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Kenneth Burke, A Rhetoric of Motives (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), p. 110.

Faith is just such a term. There is a family of meanings held together under the surname "faith," but it is a family that never seems to hold a reunion. The problem for a speaker who wants to inspire faith is to identify the motives operative in a given situation and to find the corresponding understanding of faith. Unless the life-situation and the operative meaning of the term are kept together, one can speak the word "faith," but its force will dissipate in a Babel of interpretations. The perspective of the stages gives Kierkegaard a schema for sorting out these various motives which come into play in the religious life. He identifies "Ascending Forms of Religiousness" which correspond to the characteristic motives of the three stages.

The Aesthetic. "(A) The individual relates to God so that it may go well with him on earth—consequently to profit from the God-relationship in an earthly sense."<sup>72</sup> On the face of it, this attitude toward faith seems patently hypocritical, and it often is. Religion can be good business. Kierkegaard saw that the preacher who remains within the categories of the aesthetic, the dialectic of happiness and unhappiness, "transforms the church, if not into a robber's den then into a stock-exchange building."<sup>73</sup> He also recognized, however, that the aesthetic religiosity is not always a cynical con-game, but can be a religious stance taken in all

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<sup>72</sup> JP IV, #4459.

<sup>73</sup> JP I, #634.

sincerity. After all, this is the promise of the Deuteronomic Code: keep the commandments and you will prosper. This appeal has been a common feature of American religious life. Enroute to the new land, John Winthrop argued that the colonists should keep their covenant with God "that we may live and be multiplied, and that the Lord our God may bless us in the land whither we go to possess it."<sup>74</sup> The enormously popular Henry Ward Beecher proclaimed that wealth is a direct consequence of "virtue in morality and spirituality in religion."<sup>75</sup> Slightly less venal forms of the same motive are the basic appeal of Norman Vincent Peale and Robert Schuller. Whether the motive is wealth, health, or happiness, the resulting religious consciousness is fundamentally aesthetic, and it is adequate only to a person who remains at that stage.

Kierkegaard's initial strategy with aesthetic religiosity is to offer the ultimate satisfaction of the motive: eternal happiness. In the pre-Christian discourses and in the Postscript he uses the promise of an eternal happiness to relativize temporal happiness, and then lures the aesthete into the ethical-religious as a condition for attaining it (or, from the perspective of grace, as a consequence of receiving it). In "The Expectation of an Eternal Happiness" (on II Cor. 4:17-18, "For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory."),

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<sup>74</sup> John Winthrop, "Christian Charity", in Conrad Cherry, ed., God's New Israel (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971), p. 43.

<sup>75</sup> Henry Ward Beecher, "The Tendencies of American Progress", in Cherry, p. 239.

Kierkegaard begins, as he did in "The Expectation of Faith," by indicating that the maximum a person could wish for him/herself is eternal happiness. To be indifferent to it is madness; to wish for less is foolish. But then comes the hook: the expectation of eternal happiness must be expressed temporally, which is to say, ethically.

If the expectation does not do this, then it is deceitful, a sick soul's craftiness that would sneak out of life, not a sound soul's frank presence in the temporal. Then it is not an expectation of the eternal, but a superstition about the future; then man does not rest in the trustworthiness of the eternal but jests with the possibility of the future, which is merely intriguing, like the solving of a riddle.<sup>76</sup>

The remainder of the discourse then portrays the reconciliation that the expectation of an eternal happiness effects with one's neighbors and with temporal afflictions. If Judge Wilhelm were to preach a sermon to A, this would probably be it. As Gregor Malantschuk summarizes the eighteen edifying discourses, they "are addressed to the person on the aesthetic plane in Christendom and attempt to bring about an interior realignment in him through confrontation with the eternal."<sup>77</sup> There is little doubt that Kierkegaard saw the aesthetic as the most common form of religiousness among his contemporaries. When he adopts a distinctively Christian viewpoint his stance toward the aesthetic is much less sympathetic.

The characteristic expression of faith at the transition point from the aesthetic to the ethical is trust that God will come through on the promise of eternal happiness. But Kierkegaard has anticipated

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<sup>76</sup> ED, III, 103.

<sup>77</sup> Malantschuk, p. 311.

the objection of those who won't be trapped into becoming ethical:

"and what is faith but a snare which drags us out into the infinity in which we are unable to live?"<sup>78</sup>

#### The Ethical.

(B) The individual relates to God in order to be saved from sin, in order to triumph over his inclinations, in order to find in Him a merciful judge—consequently in such a way that the relationship becomes altogether undialectical and the individual alone has benefit from this relationship.<sup>79</sup>

Because it is a function of character, there is an ordinal relation in the development of faith. For forgiveness of sins to have meaning, one must first have a consciousness of sin. Skip over this, and forgiveness is trivialized, although one may habitually read off the prayers of confession and feel vaguely uplifted by the assurance of pardon. Only a person who has taken the ethical seriously knows how to confess. The aesthete is unaware of the real nature of the conflict, and to preach forgiveness of sins to people at the aesthetic stage only confuses them. The motive of forgiveness is only present in those who have attempted the ethical and failed. Eternal happiness remains a motive, but at this stage it is dominated by the consciousness of sin. It is this complex of motives centering on personal salvation from sin that characterizes much of contemporary evangelical preaching, and it stands solidly in the Protestant tradition. The motive of forgiveness also dominates a great number of

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<sup>78</sup> E/O II, 34.

<sup>79</sup> JP IV, #4459.

Kierkegaard's Christian discourses. He has a rich variety of strategies for employing it in the service of Christianity and for keeping the ethical religiosity from becoming "undialectical" in its self-concern.

Kierkegaard began his shift toward the distinctively Christian in his discourses with the Edifying Discourses in Various Spirits of 1847. The first series is Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing, which while still keeping Christian categories in the background, is nonetheless prescribed as "Spiritual Preparation for the Office of Confession." The genius of his approach is that he presents the ethical quest at its highest pitch, the striving for a good will, in the context of the confession of sin. The direct message is "Purify your hearts in seeking the good"; the indirect message is, "You cannot." The net effect is that the will is purified in the direction of a confession, while the ethical demand remains fully in force. The conclusion of this line of argument is explicitly stated later in Kierkegaard's second discourse on "The Woman that was a Sinner." We are urged "to become, like her, indifferent to everything else, in absolute sorrow for our sins, yet in such a way that one thing is important to us, and absolutely important: to find forgiveness."<sup>80</sup> Through the purification of the will, by bringing "the multitude of sins" under the one intention of seeking forgiveness, the ethical demand for integrity and the "triumph over the inclinations" is

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<sup>80</sup> TC, p. 262.

satisfied. Kierkegaard's strategy is to guide the listener in sorrowing rightly over sin and to intensify and focus the motive of forgiveness.

In a similar manner he incorporates the motive of self-interest. It would be foolish pride to deny that we love God because we need God, and so it is with forgiveness. In the first discourse on "The Woman that was a Sinner," Kierkegaard writes:

Would anyone say that there was an element of self-love in this woman's love, that in her need it was essentially herself she loved—if anyone were to speak thus, I would reply: "naturally", and thereupon I would add, "God be gracious to us, but there simply is no other way"—and then add, "God forbid that I might ever presume to love my God or my Savior in any other way; for if there were in my love nothing of self-love in that significance of the word, I would only be imagining that I could love Him without having need of Him—and from this presumption God preserve me!"<sup>81</sup>

A second strategy is to give a realistic portrayal of the personal consequences of being forgiven. There is often a post-religious remorse in discovering that, after an experience of forgiveness, nothing much seems to have changed in the conditions of one's life. Kierkegaard put it this way:

Forgiveness of sins cannot be such that God by a single stroke, as it were, erases all guilt, abrogates all its consequences. Such a craving is only a worldly desire that does not really know what guilt is. . . . It does not mean to become another person in more fortunate circumstances, but it does mean to become a new person in the reassuring consciousness that the guilt is forgiven even if the consequences of guilt remain.<sup>82</sup>

The way he states the change in The Gospel of Suffering is that the consciousness of sin is replaced, not by a "clear conscience," but by

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<sup>81</sup> ChD, p. 384.

<sup>82</sup> JP II, #1205.



the consciousness of forgiveness: ". . . if anyone refuses to understand that forgiveness is nevertheless also a burden which is to be borne, even if an easy burden, then he takes the forgiveness in vain."<sup>83</sup> Just as sin is defined with reference to the ethical demand, so is forgiveness. By maintaining this demand Kierkegaard subverts the undialectical tendency of forgiveness to abrogate ethics.

A third strategy is an extension of the second into the content of ethics itself. In Works of Love Kierkegaard balances the consolations of Lilies of the Field and The Gospel of Suffering with the corresponding demands that forgiveness makes. He calls it "the Christian like-for-like." It is the familiar argument that God's love and forgiveness to the sinner must be expressed in loving and forgiving the neighbor. In fact they are expressed one way or the other, in that one who does not love the neighbor is revealed not to have loved God either. Here Kierkegaard offers an important analysis of the relation of faith and works, but the important feature from the rhetorical standpoint is the introduction of the motive of love. Love is, in a sense, God's motive, and the transition from the motives of forgiveness and self-interest to that of love marks a shift from the ethical religiosity to the Christian. Kierkegaard concludes Works of Love with a gloss on I John 4.7 (Beloved, let us love one another. . . .):

It is as if the apostle said, "Dear me, what is all this which would hinder you from loving; what is all this which you can win

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<sup>83</sup> GS, p. 41.

by self-love: the commandment is that you shall love, but when you understand life and yourself, then it is as if you should not need to be commanded, because to love human beings is still the only thing worth living for; without this love you really do not live; to love human beings is also the only salutary consolation for both time and eternity, and to love human beings is the only true sign that you are a Christian"—truly, a profession of faith is not enough.<sup>84</sup>

In this way the motives of the lower stages are incorporated and transformed in the highest. But there is also a change in the nature of the motive in the higher stage which has consequences for rhetoric. A speaker could rely on the motives of self-interest and forgiveness, for they are in a sense "natural" to the listener in a way that the love of God is not. God's motive can only be supplied by God, and is in that sense beyond the appeal of the speaker. There is a break in the pattern of persuasion when the authority of God's command supercedes the motives of the listener. This break in the chain of motives poses a problem for rhetoric, as it does for theology. We can see the importance of Kierkegaard's arguments in Works of Love if we examine the consequences for rhetoric of remaining in the ethical religiosity.

The ethical religiousness reaches its highest expression in the conviction that "my sins are forgiven." Where salvation is by faith alone, and faith is conceived as assurance of the forgiveness of sins, once one has attained this assurance there is technically nothing left to be done. One can only continue to cultivate forgiveness, answering the altar-call, coming back to be saved again

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<sup>84</sup> WL, p. 344.

week after week. Kierkegaard saw that under this conception faith becomes increasingly esoteric: "in the religion of our day . . . we make faith into such an inwardness that it actually disappears altogether, that life is permitted to shape itself purely secularly . . . and that instead of faith we substitute an assurance about faith."<sup>85</sup>

The problem is that the motives of eternal happiness and forgiveness reach satisfaction and terminate in faith. And yet one goes on living. The difficulty with the forgiveness of sins, says Kierkegaard, is this: "To what spontaneity does one who believes this return, or what is the spontaneity which follows on this belief. . . ."<sup>86</sup> For spontaneity we can substitute "immediacy", in the sense in which Kierkegaard speaks of faith as "immediacy after reflection."<sup>87</sup> In theological terms, it is the problem of the nature of the Christian life.

The termination of motives presents a similar problem for rhetoric. Persuasion requires a motive, and when it is satisfied, persuasion comes to an end. Preaching based on the conception of faith as assurance of forgiveness has the same problem as the believer: what to do next Sunday? One could almost wish that people would be sure to fall into sin again during the week. Many are only too glad to oblige, like lovers who quarrel in order to make up. An

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<sup>85</sup> JP I, #1135.

<sup>86</sup> JP II, #1215.

<sup>87</sup> JP II, #1123.

additional strategy is to go out and haul in more people to save while the already-saved watch; or the saved can simply enjoy one another's company and appropriate the preaching of forgiveness by way of nostalgia for the time when they were sinners. All of this amounts to a religious version of "The Rotation Method" of Either/Or.

Kierkegaard saw in his own time an overwhelming tendency for preaching to become aesthetic, a display of eloquence or a form of religious entertainment. The listeners become "spectators of the exploits of faith"<sup>88</sup> and the result is literally demoralizing.

This is not to suggest that the motives of eternal happiness and forgiveness of sins ought eventually to disappear from religious discourse. They are only corrupting when they are seen as the highest. If the assurance of faith is the satisfaction of these motives, one can in principle be finished with them. But if, as Kierkegaard holds, Christianity is a way of life or a life-task, it is a misunderstanding to finish early.

#### The Religious.

(C) It is required that the individual must confess in word and in deed (self-denial, renunciation of finite aims) the faith in which his salvation lies, but the confession will have the result that the individual suffers, humanly speaking makes himself unhappy.<sup>89</sup>

The motives of the previous stages of religiousness were expressed by the fact that the individual relates to God "so that" or "in order to." In the highest form of religiousness the expression is

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<sup>88</sup> CUP, p. 374n.

<sup>89</sup> JP IV, #4459.

"it is required." Command and obedience do not express a motive so much as a relationship. For the first time the God-relationship is an end and not a means. Whatever the initial motives were, there is now a new situation in which God's motives become primary. The individual receives a new set of motives which radically changes the old ones:

"It is impossible to have an actual relationship to God and still remain in one's merely human and earthly conception of good and evil, pleasant and unpleasant."<sup>90</sup> But to be changed in this way is to suffer.

That suffering and one's relationship to suffering are marks of the religious has several meanings for Kierkegaard. Viewed from the outside, the values of the religious life appear as suffering to people in the aesthetic and ethical stages, but there is also real inward suffering in the transformation of a person's values, in "dying to the world" (the Greek pathein—to suffer is to be changed). Finally there is the suffering which is brought on by the collision, the offense to earthly values. Kierkegaard could be morbid about this at times, and his thoughts of martyrdom certainly overestimated his contemporaries' ability to care enough to be that offended. But his own melancholy does not mitigate the depth of his insight into religious suffering.

The summary term for the transformed motives of the religious stage is gratitude and not suffering, which is a consequence. It is

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<sup>90</sup> JP I, #1509.

not gratitude over this or that good thing, which is a return to the aesthetic, or simply gratitude for my salvation, which is the ethical ("I thank God that I am not like other men") but gratitude for our relationship to God. The centrality of gratitude in Kierkegaard's own faith is a major theme of the Point of View. He wrote that "I have had more joy in the relation of obedience to God than in thoughts that I produced," so that "even in prayer my forte is thanksgiving."<sup>91</sup> He looked forward to eternity "so as to have nothing else to do but to give thanks."<sup>92</sup> The motive of gratitude is expressed in the aesthetic sphere in the early discourses on "Every Good and Perfect Gift," that "every gift is a good and perfect gift when it is received with thanksgiving."<sup>93</sup> In Works of Love he uses the debt of gratitude as the foundation of love:

The natural element of love is infinity, inexhaustible, immeasurable. If therefore you wish to preserve your love then you must take care that by the aid of infinite indebtedness, ensnared by liberty and life, it remains in its element.<sup>94</sup>

Perhaps the most significant application of the motive of gratitude is to Christ: "Christ has desired only one kind of gratitude from the individual, and as practically as possible in the form of imitation."<sup>95</sup> Suffering, obedience, and imitation of Christ

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<sup>91</sup> PV, p. 68f. See Paul Minear, "Thanksgiving as a Synthesis of the Temporal and the Eternal," in Howard A. Johnson and Niels Thulstrup, eds., A Kierkegaard Critique (Chicago: Regnery, 1962), pp. 297-307.

<sup>92</sup> PV, p. 67.

<sup>93</sup> ED I, 47.

<sup>94</sup> WL, p. 146.

<sup>95</sup> JP II, #1518.

are key categories in Kierkegaard's conception of the highest religiousness, but gratitude stands as the primary human motive. If it does not appear explicitly in many of the discourses, it may be because Kierkegaard spent so much effort in leading people to the standpoint from which gratitude is possible.

This presentation of Kierkegaard's anthropology in its relation to rhetoric is not complete. A more adequate account would make greater use of his analyses of despair and sin. The modern reader will also find an understanding of language and human sociality to be lacking, although Kierkegaard has some striking insights on these as well. What should be clear by now is the careful and systematic preparation Kierkegaard undertook to ground his communication of Christianity in an understanding of what it is to be human, and to be humanly religious.

## Chapter III

## THE FOUNDATIONS OF ARGUMENT: KIERKEGAARD'S DIALECTIC

In The Point of View for My Work as an Author, Kierkegaard offers as "The Explanation," "That the Author is and was a Religious Author." He then adds that his entire authorship "from first to last is dialectical."<sup>1</sup> If for once we may take him at his word, he was by intent a religious author, and by method a dialectician. Niels Thulstrup, in an article on the methodology of Kierkegaard scholarship, expresses the relation this way:

With respect to content there is in fact only one yardstick of values for Kierkegaard, namely, the authority which he himself appealed to and quoted: the Bible, and in the Bible particularly the New Testament; similarly, with respect to form his only yardstick and criterion are the principles of classical logic.<sup>2</sup>

Reading "dialectic" for "logic" in Thulstrup's statement, this is essentially the position presented below, although I will argue that the Christian content required for Kierkegaard a corresponding shift in the dialectical form.

In 1847, when Kierkegaard was at work on his "Dialectic of Ethical and Ethical-Religious Communication," he had proposed that it be developed "with constant reference to Aristotle's Rhetoric,"<sup>3</sup> which he had studied two years earlier. As an indication of the factors involved

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<sup>1</sup> PV, p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Niels Thulstrup, "The Complex of Problems Called 'Kierkegaard'", in Howard A. Johnson and Niels Thulstrup, eds., A Kierkegaard Critique (Chicago: Regnery, 1962), p. 295.

<sup>3</sup> JP V, #6037.



in Kierkegaard's proposal, the same journal entry begins with "N.B.: From now on the thrust should be into the specifically Christian." The dialectic of communication was apparently to "accompany" a work on the forgiveness of sins by a new Christian pseudonym (probably Anti-Climacus, although the book for which he laid aside the lectures on communication was Works of Love). This is consistent with Kierkegaard's method of developing theory and practice concurrently, so that the intensification of Christian categories in the discourses was supported by a careful delineation of the distinctively Christian modes of communication.

Kierkegaard had been developing his theory of dialectic long before his study of Aristotle, but when he applied the dialectic to religious communication, he found in Aristotle a useful foil. This is a familiar tactic of Kierkegaard's. He habitually used the Greeks as a standard, positively as a contrast to speculative philosophy and negatively as a contrast to Christianity. The noble pagans represented to him the highest strictly human achievement. His use of Aristotle fits the pattern: he could characterize contemporary preachers as sophists while charting the transformation required by Christianity of Aristotelian dialectic and rhetoric. Before examining the dialectical foundations of Kierkegaard's rhetoric, then, it is good to see what Aristotle has to say.

## ARISTOTELIAN RHETORIC AND DIALECTIC

Aristotle held that "Rhetoric is the counterpart of Dialectic."<sup>4</sup> Rhetoric might be called the persuasive or communicative aspect of dialectic; dialectic is conversely the logical or argumentative aspect of rhetoric. Even a philosopher acts as a rhetorician when he or she seeks not only to arrive at the truth but also to convince others that he or she is right. In a similar way one who seeks to persuade an audience has a better chance of succeeding if he or she gives good reasons for believing that the message is true. There is a continuum between the uses of language relative to the discovery of truth and those relative to adherence.

Both rhetoric and discourse are "within the general ken of all men" in that everyone engages in persuasion and argument to some degree.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, both come into play primarily in situations of disagreement or uncertainty, in the vast area of human cognitive activity that falls between logical and empirical knowledge. For Aristotle, discourse involved reasoning from generally accepted opinions with a view toward assessing what is probably true, or, when action is required, what is most effective.<sup>6</sup> The corresponding goal of rhetoric is to invoke pistis, faith or conviction in the probable.<sup>7</sup> Dialectic also has a negative function in discourse such that "when standing up to

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<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, Rhetoric, 1354a, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, Rhetoric, 1354a, 1-5.

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle, Topics, 100a, 30; 194b, 11.

<sup>7</sup> Aristotle, Rhetoric, 1355a, 14-18, 35-39. Cf. JP V #5779, JP II, #1148.

an argument [we shall] avoid saying anything that will obstruct us."<sup>8</sup> The most common occasions for such discourse Aristotle identifies as forensic (judicial), deliberative (political), and epideictic (moral discourse). These settings still preserve their dialectical character in Aristotle's sense. For example, there is no strictly objective certainty that a specific public policy will have the desired effect or advance the national interest, or that a given criminal is guilty. Evidence is gathered, arguments are heard pro and con, and a decision is made, presumably in favor of those who have presented the best case. Just as lawyers are trained for both defense and prosecution, dialectic and rhetoric reflect the ultimate uncertainty, the either/or of their subject matter, in that they can draw opposite conclusions from the same data.<sup>9</sup> In a passage that Kierkegaard chose as a motto for his project,<sup>10</sup> Aristotle applies this principle of uncertainty to the rhetorician. A woman urges her son not to engage in public speaking:

"For," she said, "if you say what is right, men will hate you; if you say what is wrong, the gods will hate you." The reply might be, "On the contrary, you ought to take to public speaking: for if you say what is right, the gods will love you; if you say what is wrong, men will love you."<sup>11</sup>

Where the evidence is equivocal, and there is no force of logical or scientific necessity, a conclusion is reached only by a choice; the function of dialectic and rhetoric is to give guidance in making informed choices.

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<sup>8</sup> Aristotle, Topics, 100a, 20-21.

<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, Rhetoric, 1355a, 35.

<sup>10</sup> JP V, #5786.

<sup>11</sup> Aristotle, Rhetoric, 1399a, 20-25.

Aristotle's example of the young man deciding on a career suggests another factor which dialectic and rhetoric must take into account: motive. Where the evidence applies to either side of a question, motive makes the decisive difference. In order to decide, the young man must determine by whom he wants to be loved or hated, and the relative value of the true and the just versus his own happiness. Assessing and appealing to the auditor's motives are thus an inherent part of dialectical/rhetorical argument. This motivational appeal is not to be confused with the sophistry of pandering to the audience's "baser instincts." The characteristic of uncertain situations which call for dialectical reasoning is that the audience needs to make a decision, or it wouldn't be deliberating at all. The decision could not be made without reference to that need. As Aristotle says in the Nicomachean Ethics, "Intellect itself, however, moves nothing, but only the intellect which aims at an end and is practical."<sup>12</sup> The goal of dialectic is not to exploit the motives, but to incorporate them into the reasoning process. Thus Aristotle speaks of "desiring reason" or "reasoning desire."<sup>13</sup> Aristotle identifies four sources of dialectical arguments:

1. "The securing of propositions." All argument proceeds from a disagreement or a problem to be solved, but also from an underlying set of agreements without which no discourse would be possible. The

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<sup>12</sup> Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1139a, 32ff.

<sup>13</sup> Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1139a, 32ff.

dialectician needs to identify both to argue effectively. In many cases this identification will be all that is achieved.

2. "The power to distinguish in how many senses an expression is used." "Define your terms" is often an annoying subterfuge in argument, but it does express an essential function of dialectical reasoning. Logic is based on univocal terms, but most expressions of value (good, just, right) are equivocal, as are most anthropological terms (soul, mind, love, hate). Reasoning from such terms depends upon finding their operant meaning in a given situation.

3. "The discovery of the differences of things."

4. "The investigation of likeness."

A great deal of argumentation proceeds by making comparisons, distinctions, and analogies. Aristotle points out that distinctions are most fruitful when they are made between objects belonging to the same "genus." For example, it is not particularly instructive to distinguish sensation from knowledge (he thinks) but it is to distinguish wisdom from temperance.<sup>14</sup> The converse is true of likenesses. An analogy between "my love" and a red, red rose is more interesting than one between a rose and a tulip (unless the subject is botany, which is not a subject for dialectics). The concepts of difference and likeness applied to a single subject suggest the kind of dialectic that is most familiar to us today: a multiplicity of viewpoints, thinking by opposition, an emphasis on "both sides" of any issue.

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<sup>14</sup> Aristotle, Topics, Ch. 16.

As this list suggests, Aristotle's dialectic already has a rhetorical thrust. He is concerned to teach his pupils to handle themselves well in public debates. To do so, they must understand the underlying structures of clear and effective discourse. Since dialectic does not produce knowledge in Aristotle's view, conceptual clarity and effectiveness in defending or advancing one's opinions are its chief goals.

Just as it is important to know how to argue, it is also necessary to know when not to. We can close our discussion of Aristotle's dialectic with a comment about the appropriate limits of argumentation, a subject which had particular importance for Kierkegaard:

Not every problem, nor every thesis, should be examined, but only one which might puzzle one of those who need argument, not punishment or perception. For people who are puzzled to know whether one ought to honour the gods and love one's parents or not need punishment, while those who are puzzled to know whether snow is white or not need perception.<sup>15</sup>

The case of honoring the gods and loving one's parents is more problematic. Aristotle may be pointing to the fact that in order for discourse to proceed at all there must be some initial agreements between the two parties, and that these are examples of presuppositions which can be taken to be universal. In another sense they are the wrong questions. That humans should honor the gods follows from the concept of what a god is and whether they exist. If these questions were answered, the question of honoring the gods would not arise. Likewise,

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<sup>15</sup> Aristotle, Topics, 105a, 1-10.

one may ask what it means to love, but not whether to love one's parents, since this would follow from the concept of love. The task of the dialectician in such a case would be to pose the questions properly. Finally, since Aristotle prescribes punishment he may be pointing to the ethical character of these questions, where the issue is not one of knowledge but of obedience. To ask such questions may simply be to disguise disobedience by intellectual doubt. But here we may be stretching Aristotle too far in the direction of Kierkegaard. It is enough at this point to take note of Aristotle's advice that careful constraints must be placed on the subjects of inquiry if it is to produce any results—what Kierkegaard called "tying the knot" in the thread of one's thought.

#### KIERKEGAARD'S DIALECTICS

Like Aristotle, Kierkegaard was insistent that rhetoric must be grounded in dialectic lest the urge to persuade should overtake respect for the truth. In the introduction to the Postscript, he tells of a dialectician's reaction to an orator who skillfully manipulated the emotions of his audience:

But the poor dialectician goes home with a heavy heart. He sees indeed that the problem was not even presented, much less solved. . . . With the unhappy love of admiration he understands that there must be a tremendous justification also in the force of eloquence.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> CUP, p. 16.

In a journal entry cited earlier, Kierkegaard describes his own method in similar terms: "The fact is that before I can begin to employ the rhetorical I always must have the dialectical at my finger tips, must go through it many times."<sup>17</sup> Here we will follow Kierkegaard's advice and attempt to understand his dialectic as it forms a foundation for his rhetoric.

In addition to his customary reliance on the Greeks, Kierkegaard developed his concept of dialectic in part as a critique of Hegel and drawing on insights from the German logician Trendelenborg and from his teacher Sibbern, a process that is analyzed in great detail in Gregor Malantschuk's Kierkegaard's Thought.<sup>18</sup> From Malantschuk's account it becomes apparent that Kierkegaard's dialectic encompasses a remarkable variety of concerns: an analysis of the forms of thought, both individually and in their "organic unity," which characterize the "actually existing subjective thinker," a schema for arranging the various scholarly and scientific disciplines by the manner in which they take existence into account, the development of a method of inquiry and of communication for Kierkegaard's own work, and a delineation of the relationship of Christianity to human knowledge. These concerns are developed concurrently, not as a "system," but as a matrix of viewpoints which are combined in various ways in Kierkegaard's authorship. That dialectic has such a wide range of applications should discourage us

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<sup>17</sup> SD, p. 135.

<sup>18</sup> Gregor Malantschuk, Kierkegaard's Thought (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971).



from seeking a single, clearly defined meaning of the term. In Kierkegaard's usage dialectic can mean clear and consistent thinking in the broadest sense, or specific forms of thought: evaluating a proposition by exploring its consequences, the comparison of conflicting viewpoints, the changes in the meaning of a concept according to the context in which it is applied, the co-ordination of polar concepts (finite/infinite, eternal/temporal), or a method of refutation by demonstrating inconsistencies. Dialectic can also refer to a product of thought, a particular theory such as "the dialectic of authority," "the dialectic of communication," or simply "the dialectic." Finally, dialectic can be descriptive: human existence is dialectical, Christianity is dialectical, Kierkegaard is a "dialectical person." When we speak of "Kierkegaard's dialectic," then, we are speaking of a large family of concepts.

Without pretending to be more precise than Kierkegaard was himself, we can distinguish four aspects of dialectic that are foundational to his rhetoric:

1. Existential dialectic. As we saw in the preceding chapter, Kierkegaard understands that human existence is itself dialectical. To be human is to be caught inescapably in a polarity of freedom and necessity, finite and infinite. To this dialectical structure there corresponds a dialectical process of thought, a "logic" of inwardness by which people come to understand themselves and make decisions that shape their identity. It is this logic that the rhetorician must follow if he or she is to persuade an audience.

2. Quantitative and qualitative dialectic. One of the functions of rhetoric is the effective deployment of arguments drawn from other fields of inquiry. In classical terms, dialectic governs inventio, the invention of arguments, while rhetoric determines their application (dispositio) in discourse. What is needed is a means of determining the appropriate contributions and limits of particular modes of argument, and within each mode, an assessment of those that are stronger or weaker. Kierkegaard's distinction of quantitative and qualitative dialectic provides him with just such a classification—a theory of dispositio.

3. Dialectical forms of argument (inventio). Here we will examine some of Kierkegaard's own characteristic ways of structuring or "inventing" arguments. The aim is not to evaluate their validity but to identify their use as rhetorical strategems, for dialectical reasoning is itself a principal means of persuasion.

4. The dialectic of communication. In the most general sense this is the subject of this entire study. More narrowly understood, the dialectic of communication is Kierkegaard's account of the proper relationship between communicator and recipient as conditioned by the existential dialectic and the object of the communication. We will take up these issues in Chapters Four and Five.

### Existential Dialectic

In a journal entry which he later used in The Sickness Unto Death, Kierkegaard writes:

Most systematizers in relation to their systems are like a man who builds an enormous castle and himself lives alongside it in a shed; they themselves do not live in the enormous systematic building. But in the realm of mind and spirit this nonresidence is and remains a decisive objection. Spiritually understood, a man's thoughts must be the building in which he lives—otherwise the whole thing is deranged.<sup>19</sup>

Residence in the house of thought is an apt image for Kierkegaard's notion of existential dialectic. It expresses his two chief concerns: that thought and existence must be constantly correlated with one another, so that one's life is penetrated by thought and one's thought is expressed in one's life; and that this process of thinking/existing should form a coherent structure, a "building" and not a pile of lumber and bricks.

Kierkegaard has a great deal to say about the relation of thought and existence, particularly in criticism of the Hegelian penchant for speculative ("abstract," "pure") thought. That a philosopher spends his or her life pursuing philosophical problems that are never (and perhaps could never be) expressed in personal existence is an indication to Kierkegaard that the philosopher is either comically absent-minded or an intellectual mercenary seeking university appointments.<sup>20</sup> Against such abstract thinking Kierkegaard brings two main charges: that by ignoring or abstracting from the real problems of human existence it is unethical, and that it is contradictory, for a contradiction between thought and existence is every bit as much in error as a contradiction in logic. If a "pure thinker" were to

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<sup>19</sup> JP III, #3308.

<sup>20</sup> JP III, #3308.

correlate thought with existence, "the enterprise of pure thinking would have led to one suicide after the other":

For suicide is the only tolerable existential consequence of pure thought, when this type of abstraction is not conceived as something merely partial in relation to being human, willing to strike an agreement with an ethical and religious form of personal existence, but assumes to be all and highest. This is not to praise the suicide, but to respect the passion.<sup>21</sup>

Kierkegaard is not simply chastising intellectuals for failing to practice what they preach. The difficulty lies deeper, in that the thought itself is distorted when it loses its connection with human reality, fails to find the "existential consequences." It becomes imaginary and fantastical. The problem of praxis only arises after one has begun to think about existence in earnest.

This suggests another side of Kierkegaard's point which is equally important. Thought cannot completely absorb existence: "To think existence sub specie aeterni and in abstract terms is essentially to abrogate it,"<sup>22</sup> for existence is irrevocably concrete. "Existence, like movement, is a difficult category to deal with; for if I think it, I abrogate it, and then I do not think it."<sup>23</sup> Kierkegaard does not infer that existence is entirely beyond thought, simply that the two stand in a constant dialectical tension. Between philosophical suicide and an animal mindlessness there is only the agony of being an "existing subjective thinker."

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<sup>21</sup> CUP, p. 273.

<sup>22</sup> CUP, p. 273.

<sup>23</sup> CUP, p. 274.

The proper relation of thought to existence in Kierkegaard's view is that of possibility to actuality. Ethically regarded, "A valid thought is a possibility, and every further question as to whether it is real or not should be dismissed as irrelevant."<sup>24</sup> As Kierkegaard quotes himself from Stages on Life's Way, "It is intelligent to ask two questions: (1) Is it possible? (2) Can I do it? But it is unintelligent to ask these two questions: (1) Is it real? (2) Has my neighbor Christopherson done it?"<sup>25</sup> The task of ethical/existential thinking—and existential thinking is inherently ethical—is to conceive reality in such a way as to define the possibilities for one's existence. Thinking cannot itself produce reality or destroy it.<sup>26</sup>

The problem for an existential thinker is to keep the active and reflective dimensions in balance. I once had charge of a teenaged girl who was completely reliable in one way: if she conceived of a plan or formed a firm resolution to do something, she was sure not to do it. She decided to go out for track, so she bought running shoes and shorts, wore them often—but never ran. Her imaginative powers were such that the enjoyment of an activity was exhausted in thinking about it, so why go to the trouble of doing it? Meanwhile her life went on quite untouched by all her noble intentions. A person with average intellectual capacities is always able to conceive of a good deal more

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<sup>24</sup> CUP, p. 292.

<sup>25</sup> CUP, p. 286.

<sup>26</sup> CUP, p. 295.

than he or she is willing or able to express in existence, but this is surely no excuse for confusing thinking with doing.

The two "intelligent" questions Kierkegaard poses (Is it possible? Can I do it?) reflect the dual nature of the existential dialectic, what he calls a "double reflection":

The reflection of inwardness gives to the subjective thinker a double reflection. In thinking, he thinks the universal; but as existing in this thought and assimilating it in his inwardness, he becomes more and more subjectively isolated.<sup>27</sup>

The first stage of reflection is to clarify one's thoughts— principles, presuppositions, values, etc. The second is to determine their consequences for one's existence, the form in which a thought can find existential expression. If no existential correlate is found, the thought is a fantasy. If one refuses the existential consequences, one is obliged to reject the thought. But if one's existence is an enactment of the thought, then the "double reflection" has reached its goal, which Kierkegaard calls "reduplication."<sup>28</sup>

Kierkegaard had a seemingly endless zeal for maintaining the essential relationship between the two poles of his dialectic. That he applied it to himself is abundantly clear from his continual reflection on his personal mode of existence in relation to his authorship—that he lived publicly as an aesthete during the period surrounding the publication of Either/Or, that the discourses published under his own name reflected only so much of the religious as he felt he had attained

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<sup>27</sup> CUP, p. 67.

<sup>28</sup> JP III, #3665.

at the time—with each publication he sought to determine how he should live in relation to it. It should not be surprising, then, that double reflection and reduplication are concepts central to his rhetoric.

The existential dialectic is a mode of thinking which corresponds to Kierkegaard's notion of the structure of human existence. The synthesis of infinite and finite, freedom and necessity, eternal and temporal which constitutes human reality is duplicated in the interplay of thought and existence:

An existing individual is constantly in process of becoming; the actual existing subjective thinker constantly reproduces this existential situation in his thoughts, and translates all his thinking into terms of process. . . . Thus constantly to be in process of becoming is the elusiveness that pertains to the infinite in existence. . . . The incessant becoming generates the uncertainty of the earthly life, where everything is uncertain.<sup>29</sup>

To replicate the structure of existence in one's thought means to incorporate at least two factors that are not ordinarily a part of logical thinking: uncertainty and concern. The unfinished, synthetic nature of existence, its openness to the future requires the thinker to reach conclusions and make decisions about matters that are objectively uncertain—conclusions which, strictly speaking, logic would forbid. This is partly what Kierkegaard means by his category of the absurd:

Quite simply, the absurd is this: that I, a rational being, must act in the situation where my understanding and reflection say to me: you can just as well do the one thing as the other, where my understanding and my reflection say to me: you cannot act—that I nevertheless must act.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> CUP, p. 79.

<sup>30</sup> JP III, #3707.

To give reason its due in existential questions means that "the genuine subjective existing thinker is always as negative as he is positive, and vice versa."<sup>31</sup> In any important decision, such as moving, a job, taking political action, a person who is honest with him/herself looks at both sides of the question with equal care in the awareness that there is no way of knowing beforehand how it will turn out. To achieve certainty in matters that are objectively uncertain is rationally a mistake, so here one phase of the dialectic comes to a limit.

At the same time, the object of thought may be of deepest concern to the individual, and the uncertainty only heightens the concern. It is precisely the element of concern that tips the balance. "The dialectic always ends in some way with pathos . . . the necessary knot which had to be tied in the dialectical thread."<sup>32</sup> In the balance of pro and contra, deliberation would go on indefinitely, like the mule who starved between two piles of hay. Only the thinker who cares about the outcome, who needs to choose will ever come to a resolution, as Aristotle indicated.<sup>33</sup> Like Aristotle, Kierkegaard does not advocate casting reason aside and acting out of emotion. The pathos to which he refers covers the broad range of human convictions and values; it is the thinker's passion that transforms an "idle thought" into a conviction.

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<sup>31</sup> CUP, p. 78.

<sup>32</sup> JP I, #762.

<sup>33</sup> See above, p. 87.



The essential point is that values do not simply emerge from reasons and proofs:

Reasons can lay an egg no more than a rooster can, at most a wind egg, and no matter how much intercourse they have with each other they never beget or bear a conviction.

If I actually have a firm conviction (and this, to be sure, is a qualification of intense inwardness oriented to spirit), then to me my firm conviction is higher than reasons; it is actually the conviction which sustains the reasons, not the reasons which sustain the conviction.<sup>34</sup>

On the face of it, this may appear to be a model for ideological thinking, where one employs reasoning solely in defense of one's interests, but Kierkegaard's insistence on a dialectical balance of pro and contra is directed against just such abuses. Kierkegaard's real point is that convictions are a form of presupposition or premise. As such they cannot be demonstrated, but can only be "proven" indirectly, by their consequences.<sup>35</sup>

Indirect proof involves "thinking a thought through in all its implications"<sup>36</sup> to see whether they are consistent with one another and can be consistently maintained. Kierkegaard used this form of argument negatively a great deal, especially in his criticisms of Christendom. An early example is cited by Gregor Malantschuk.<sup>37</sup> Kierkegaard was examining Grundtvig's doctrine of the inspiration and literal inerrancy of the Apostle's Creed:

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<sup>34</sup> JP III, #3608.

<sup>35</sup> JP III, #2341; Malantschuk, p. 112.

<sup>36</sup> JP I, #155.

<sup>37</sup> Malantschuk, p. 113.

. . . but if we insist on the idea of inspiration in this way . . . then we must also certainly limit this activity to the language in which it was originally given, but at present all the churches that have essentially the same creed have it in translation. . . . But must we now concede a miracle with respect to the translation? . . . But, of course, with translation many more snags arise etc.—consequently the more consistently that theory is maintained, the more it diverges from the truth, but if it is not consistently maintained, then we are just where we started, and Grundtvig's theory has no significance whatsoever.<sup>38</sup>

To be consistent Grundtvig would need to introduce Greek into corporate worship. But this in turn would be to turn away from one of the cherished goals of the Reformation—the use of the "mother tongue." His position is not disproved by Kierkegaard's argument; it is rendered untenable, or at least one can then find out how far Grundtvig is willing to go.

Indirect proof is not simply a means of refutation, however. It is the principle intellectual means of clarifying basic principles:

God is a highest conception, not to be explained in terms of other things, but explainable only by exploring more and more profoundly the conception itself. The highest principles for all thought can be demonstrated only indirectly (negatively).<sup>39</sup>

Kierkegaard's numerous "thought experiments," his pseudonyms, psychohistories and parables are in this sense existential explorations of concepts or indirect proofs.

There is a corresponding existential proof. A person's conviction "can be defended only ethically, personally—that is, by the sacrifices which he is willing to make for it, the fearlessness with

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<sup>38</sup> JP V, #5089.

<sup>39</sup> CUP, p. 197.

which he holds on to it."<sup>40</sup> In rhetorical terminology, this is ethical proof, where the ethical is understood as a reflection of character or personal conviction. The extreme form of this proof is the argument from sacrifice, Pascal's familiar criterion: "I believe only those stories for which the witnesses would readily die."<sup>41</sup> Martyrdom was once held to be one of the most convincing proofs of Christianity, the true imitation of Christ, although in a contemporary situation willingness to die for anything is apt to be counted as fanaticism. Yet a concerned Christian is still haunted by this ultimate test of conviction. Consequently, Kierkegaard sought to reassert the need for sacrifice in Christendom:

The preaching of Christianity, or its preachers, have long enough—both pecuniarily and with respect to honours, titles, and dignities—lived off of the fact . . . that there have been those who sacrificed everything for Christianity. This is no longer convincing to a knowing congregation. Speaking frankly, one cannot blame them for it. How could a contradiction be capable of convincing?<sup>42</sup>

There are countless lesser forms of existential proof. As a negative example Kierkegaard cites a painfully common experience: a person professes friendship, acts as if he were coming forth to greet you—but all the while he is backing away.<sup>43</sup> Anyone who has worked with voluntary organizations will recognize an analogous situation. A committee sees a great need, conceives of great plans and offers

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<sup>40</sup> JP III, #3608.

<sup>41</sup> Cited in Chaim Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, The New Rhetoric (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), p. 249.

<sup>42</sup> JFY, p. 148.

<sup>43</sup> WL, p. 102.

countless suggestions as to how they can be implemented—and sits in embarrassed silence when the call goes out for volunteers. From Kierkegaard's perspective, the only appropriate response could be laughter, for their inaction proves that it was all a joke. Acting on a conviction does not demonstrate that it is true, but it does prove the conviction is an honest one and lays a claim on the convictions of others that a mere statement of opinion does not. In current jargon, such action establishes the "credibility" of the actor and the "viability" of the conviction. The prevalence of these two terms in contemporary discourse is an indication of the importance of ethical proof.

The common feature of indirect proof in thought and existence, what Gregor Malantschuk calls "the nerve" in Kierkegaard's dialectic, is the concept of consistency.<sup>44</sup> The key distinction between the consistency pertaining to convictions and that pertaining to either logic or nature is, in Malantschuk's words, "that where freedom is predominant, that is, in man's historical development, consistency is defined by freedom and not by necessity."<sup>45</sup> Even in the realm of thought consistency is grounded in freedom and not in logical necessity. The commitment to thinking consistently is an ethical choice, not the "movement" of thought itself—as is reflected in our common expression: "intellectual integrity." There is a negative confirmation of this freedom when (as frequently occurs) people refuse to change their minds

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<sup>44</sup> Malantschuk, p. 167.

<sup>45</sup> Malantschuk, p. 166.

even after all the arguments they can muster have been refuted. Basic assumptions are chosen, not deduced, and no force of logical necessity can stop someone from holding them. But it is just this stubbornness which makes a person and not a bundle of emotions and opinions. Consistency as applied to human beings is more than systematic coherence of thought; it is the continuity of decisions and the coordination of patterns of decision with one another which defines human character.

When the concept of consistency is applied not just to particular instances of decision-making or trains of thought, but to the personality as a whole, it provides the structural principle of the "house of thought" to which we alluded at the beginning of this section. Although Kierkegaard rules out the possibility of a "system" of existence (since system implies finality, totality, and existence is a process of becoming<sup>46</sup>), his dialectic does seek an appropriate existential form of unity in the coherence or integrity of the person. As Malantschuk puts it, "the goal for all Kierkegaard's dialectical efforts—as far as we can see—is simply and solely organic unity and not systematic unity."<sup>47</sup>

Kierkegaard expresses this goal from several standpoints, as here with respect to thought, imagination and feeling:

The task is not to exalt the one at the expense of the other, but to give them an equal status, to unify them in simultaneity; the medium in which they are unified is existence.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> CUP, pp. 107ff.

<sup>47</sup> Malantschuk, p. 111.

<sup>48</sup> CUP, p. 311.

Or the classical values:

The true is not higher than the good and the beautiful, but the true and the good and the beautiful belong essentially to every human existence, and are unified for an existing individual not in thought but in existence.<sup>49</sup>

Or the "spheres of existence":

The subjective thinker is aesthetic enough to give his life aesthetic content, ethical enough to regulate it, and dialectical enough to interpenetrate it with thought.<sup>50</sup>

Missing from these statements of the need for a coordination among the various aspects of human existence is an indication of their organizing principle. It is not enough, for example, to have values and to act upon them; there must be a central focus for ordering the plurality of values. People have a way of gathering opinions and presuppositions willy-nilly, some from parents and peers, some from the church, school, and place of employment. The result is that, even if these perspectives are adopted self-consciously and expressed in existence, there is no essential unity. Kierkegaard saw that "the lives of many men go on in such a way that they have indeed premises for living but reach no conclusions."<sup>51</sup> They lack "the necessary life-view," which dialectically "stands out whole and clear in its necessary coherence."<sup>52</sup>

This quest for a principle of unity was a strong motif of the Gilleleie journal entry of August 1, 1835, a flash of insight that was

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<sup>49</sup> CUP, p. 311.

<sup>50</sup> CUP, p. 314.

<sup>51</sup> AR, p. 3.

<sup>52</sup> AR, p. 4.

in many respects a charter for the development to follow. The young Kierkegaard was looking for an "organic view," "so that I could base the development of my thought . . . upon something which is bound up with the deepest roots of my existence, through which I am, so to speak, grafted into the divine, to which I cling fast even though the whole world may collapse."<sup>53</sup> He had "vainly sought an anchor in the boundless sea of pleasure as well as in the depths of knowledge." He had tried a Stoic resignation and a retreat to introspection: "What did I find? Not my self. . . ." He finally concluded that "consequently the seeking and finding of the Kingdom of Heaven was the first thing to be resolved"—although by his own report he put off that quest as long as he could.

The intimations of the Gilleleie entry emerge full-grown in later pseudonyms. "A" in Either/Or expresses the quest for a "harmony of the personal virtues" in the Greek mode; Johannes Climacus plumbs "the depths of knowledge"; and Anti-Climacus finally elucidates that "grafting into the divine" which is the ultimate condition for having a self. The possibility of a dialectical unity, an integration of thought and existence, has (not surprisingly) the same ground as the unity of the self. As we saw in the previous chapter, for Kierkegaard this is to be found in Christianity, where "the self is grounded transparently in the power which posited it."<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> JP V, #5100.

<sup>54</sup> SD, p. 147.

Without attempting a full account of the relation Kierkegaard makes of the dialectical structure to Christianity, we can suggest a few of its central features as an organizing principle. We saw that Kierkegaard's anthropology led to a god-term, and so it is with dialectic:

For dialectic is in its truth a benevolent helper which discovers and assists in finding where the absolute object of faith and worship is. . . . Dialectic itself does not see the absolute, but it leads, as it were, the individual up to it, and says: "Here it must be, that I guarantee; when you worship here, you worship God."<sup>55</sup>

The drive for consistency among the multiplicity of values leads to a highest value which is at the same time the co-ordinating principle for all the others. This is expressed in the Postscript as "the simultaneous maintenance of an absolute relationship to the absolute telos and a relative relationship to relative ends."<sup>56</sup> Applied to Christianity, this is what it means to "seek first the Kingdom of God," and that no one can serve two masters—recurrent themes of Kierkegaard's discourses.

Finding the absolute telos does not bring the dialectical quest to an end, however, so that one can calmly begin the process of setting one's life in order or perhaps to construct a theological system. Instead, it brings dialectic to its limit, to a point of crisis. The existing thinker's relation to God combines the maximum uncertainty with the maximum passion. Dialectic can go no farther than to define and maintain this uncertainty and to correlate it with the requirements of

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<sup>55</sup> CUP, pp. 438-439.

<sup>56</sup> CUP, p. 347.



existence. Every subsequent decision about relative ends, or about existential expressions of the absolute partakes of this uncertainty.

This situation would hold with any expression for "the absolute" in Kierkegaard's view, but it is doubly compounded in the case of Christianity, for Christ is not an idea but a paradoxical realization of all the tensions of the dialectic in existence. As the "God-man" he unites the infinite qualitative difference between God and humanity. The eternal and the temporal come together in the "God in time," and the believer must seek eternal happiness in relation to a concrete historical event.

This is to say that Christianity remains dialectical throughout. "If we overleap the dialectical, Christianity as a whole becomes a comfortable delusion, a superstition, and a superstition of the most dangerous kind, because it is overbelief in the truth, if Christianity be the truth."<sup>57</sup>

Climacus gave a definition of the appropriate sense of truth in regard to the qualitative dialectic:

An objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation-process of the most passionate inwardness is the truth, the highest truth attainable for an existing individual.<sup>58</sup>

All truth-claims of the qualitative dialectic have essentially this same status, and Christianity is no exception simply because it is "the highest." But there is this difference regarding Christianity, that the object of faith is not simply an objective uncertainty, an idea of God

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<sup>57</sup> CUP, p. 385.

<sup>58</sup> CUP, p. 182.

that has its own internal consistency which thought can elaborate and existence can enact. Christianity presents what Kierkegaard calls a "dialectic in the second instance," meaning that it is dialectical not only in terms of the "mode of acquisition" but in its content as well.<sup>59</sup> The object of faith is Christ, a paradox, one that renders the existence of the believer itself paradoxical.<sup>60</sup> This is the well-known stumblingblock and foolishness. The paradox of God/man existing in time cannot be understood, and yet the believer bases her/his life and hope on the very thing which he/she cannot understand.

The effect of the paradox is also to close off the possibility of a theoretical understanding of God. If Christ's primary work had been to teach a doctrine of God this would not be the case. One could learn the doctrine, believe it, and govern one's life accordingly. Christ would then be (for the believer) God's pre-eminent prophet. For Kierkegaard, however, the essential point about Christ is the Incarnation, God's existence in time as a particular human. The revelation then consists not in a doctrine, but in this man's life and activity. "And hence, Christianly understood, the truth consists not in knowing the truth but in being the truth."<sup>61</sup> All "Christian truth" is in this sense incarnational, and the Christian is related to it as a demand on his/her existence; it can be "known" only by existing in it. Christianity is therefore "an existence-communication," and the

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<sup>59</sup> CUP, p. 494.

<sup>60</sup> CUP, p. 501.

<sup>61</sup> TC, p. 201.

believer is related paradoxically/dialectically to Christ in imitation (Christ as Prototype) and worship (Christ as Savior). To repeat a phrase that summarizes Kierkegaard's view, "All Christianity is a life-course."<sup>62</sup> To want something more by way of metaphysics or a speculative theory about God is to want something other than Christianity.

With this important qualification, Kierkegaard's dialectic of existence is applied quite consistently to Christianity, and the dialectic he developed through the Postscript provides the basic argumentative structure of the subsequent Christian discourses.

#### Quantitative and Qualitative Dialectic

In classical rhetoric the task of evaluating arguments for their rhetorical effect was called dispositio (Greek: taxis). It involved the selection of arguments relevant to a given case and a particular audience and their arrangement in discourse for maximum effectiveness. Attention to disposition prevents the speaker from offering arguments that are irrelevant to the real issue before an audience, or from arguing a point that is no longer or not yet in question. Most important, dispositio is a matter of determining whether an argument is really capable of proving what the speaker hopes to prove. Kierkegaard takes up these same issues in his distinction between quantitative and qualitative dialectics. He uses

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<sup>62</sup> JP III, #3379.

the distinction to determine which arguments are admissible in a given case, and in a broader sense to develop a schema of scholarly and scientific disciplines according to the kinds of question they are capable of answering.

In his schema of disciplines, Kierkegaard develops the subjective side of Aristotle's principle of objective uncertainty. The disciplines are categorized according to their emphasis on the object or on the human subject, the existential or qualitative dialectic dealing with questions that have an essential relation to the existence of the knower. Logic, mathematics, and the natural sciences are not subject to this dialectic for Aristotle because their results are objectively certain, and for Kierkegaard because they have an indifferent relation to the knower. Of course one may be intensely concerned about solving a logical problem or making a scientific experiment, but neither will the method of inquiry incorporate that concern nor will the outcome essentially affect the identity of the inquirer as a human being. History and social or political analysis produce conclusions that are objectively uncertain, but like logic and mathematics, they do not have in Kierkegaard's view anything other than an accidental relation to the knower. It is true that the "age" and social context in which I live affect my identity, but interpretations of history and society do not interpret me as an existing individual, only anonymously as a member of a group or of humanity in general. These areas of inquiry involve a dialectic that has some similarities to that of Aristotle, and that Kierkegaard calls

a "quantitative dialectic," in that their conclusions amount to approximations and assessments of probability.

As soon as I begin to make use of such conclusions to understand myself and what I am to do, other factors enter in, namely my values, concerns, and commitments. In Kierkegaard's categories these fall within the realm of the ethical and religious. Following this argument, he concludes that "Only ethical and ethical-religious knowledge has an essential relationship to the existence of the knower."<sup>63</sup> In categorizing types of knowledge Kierkegaard here returns to the locus of equality from an epistemological standpoint—the ethical-religious as the knowledge that is essential to being human. Speaking of the ethical, Kierkegaard (Johannes Climacus) writes: ". . . the difference between the wise man and the simplest human being is merely this vanishing little distinction, that the simple man knows the essential, while the wise man little by little learns to know that he knows it or learns to know that he does not know it."<sup>64</sup> Kierkegaard does not mean to romanticize the common folk, but simply to indicate that the knowledge of what it is to be human is not a function of intellectual acumen, but more akin to a justicia originalis: everyone is able to know. Or, as Climacus puts it:

Every man is by nature designed to become a thinker—honor and praise to the God who created man in his own image! God cannot be

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<sup>63</sup> CUP, p. 177.

<sup>64</sup> CUP, p. 143.

held responsible if habit, and routine, and want of passion, and affectation, and gossip with friends and neighbors, little by little ruin most men, so that they become thoughtless. . . .<sup>65</sup>

In this sense, Kierkegaard's dialectic follows Aristotle's position, that it is "within the general ken" of all people, not a special discipline of philosophers or scientists. People may be exempt from understanding formal logic or biology, but not from understanding their own ethical existence. Just as ethical integrity is demanded of all people as people, so it must be accompanied by and cannot be accomplished without an integrity of thought, which is the role of dialectic. There is therefore a telos in Kierkegaard's dialectic of existence in the direction of the ethical-religious, and for this reason he calls it a "qualitative dialectic."

Kierkegaard's schema of disciplines sought to maintain a rigorous distinction between the qualitative and the quantitative dialectic, not to defend ethics and religion against science and philosophy, but to preserve the integrity of each. A Jutland folk rhyme expressed his concern so well that he quoted it several times:

Concerning the Relationship between Christianity and Philosophy.  
Motto:

If a body meet a body  
carrying a spade,  
And if a body bears a rake,  
need either be afraid?<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> CUP, p. 46.

<sup>66</sup> Walter Lowrie's translation, in his Kierkegaard (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), II, p. 166. See JP III, #3259, #3266.

As a partial illustration of Kierkegaard's position, we may take an example from art. A painter requires both the ability to paint and a knowledge of his or her materials--pigments, brushes, canvas. Developing a white paint that won't yellow with age is a problem for the quantitative dialectic. If the effort is successful and methodical, a formula will result that can be used to make more paint, and it won't matter (except possibly financially) who discovered it. To use the paint to make a painting, however, is a problem for the qualitative dialectic. The painting that results will stand "in an essential relation" to the painter and in that sense even the work of a painter whose name is unknown is not "anonymous." If someone should copy that painting it will not be equivalent to the original in the same manner as one tube of paint is to another.

An analogous relation obtains in other areas of inquiry. Kierkegaard explores the relation of ethical deliberation to its historical context at some length in the Postscript. In making any ethical choice, an objective analysis of the context and possible effects of an intended action is essential, and is itself an ethical responsibility--the more objective the better. One employs the quantitative dialectic of the historian or sociologist to consider cause and effect and assess probabilities. Parallel to this deliberation, and quite distinct from it is a subjective, qualitative dialectic which weighs intentions, values, and obligations. As Kierkegaard puts it, "World-historically I see the effects, ethically

I see the purpose."<sup>67</sup> History does not deal with the ethical in its essential character, but incorporates "factors which do not obey an ethical dialectic":

accidents, circumstances, the play of forces entering into the historic totality that modifyingly incorporates the deed of the individual so as to transform it into something that does not directly belong to him.<sup>68</sup>

Nor does ethics regard those factors which may be of greatest historical interest:

. . . whatever a man may accomplish in the world, even to the most astonishing of achievements, it is none the less quite dubious in its significance, unless the individual has been ethically clear when he made his choice, has ethically clarified his choice to himself. The ethical quality is jealous for its own integrity, and is quite unimpressed by the most astounding quantity.<sup>69</sup>

The quantitative dialectic aims solely at knowledge; the qualitative aims at valuation, choice, and action, and at knowledge only in order to act. Knowledge cannot replace commitment, any more than a spade can replace a rake, and for this reason the rational processes appropriate to each must be kept distinct.

Kierkegaard maintains the same distinction regarding the natural sciences. No matter how well a physiologist explains the nervous system, "he cannot explain how a consciousness comes into existence, or how a consciousness of the environment becomes self-consciousness or God-consciousness."<sup>70</sup> In Kierkegaard's view a

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<sup>67</sup> CUP, p. 139.

<sup>68</sup> CUP, p. 120.

<sup>69</sup> CUP, pp. 119-120.

<sup>70</sup> JP III, #2807.



scientist who is consistent with his or her own principles admits these limits, and will not try to use the results of quantitative research to draw conclusions one way or the other about the qualitative, the ethical and the religious. Nor will the prudent theologian attempt to garner support for belief in God from the natural sciences. (In this regard Kierkegaard might have appreciated the response of the British entomologist J.B.S. Haldane to a group of clergy. They had asked him what conclusions he would draw about the Creator from a contemplation of creation. Haldane replied, "An inordinate fondness for beetles."<sup>71</sup>) Kierkegaard saw the difficulties that arise for theology from such dialectical confusion:

At present natural science shows that a whole range of ideas about natural phenomena found in Holy Scripture are not scientifically defensible: ergo, Holy Scripture is not God's Word, is not a revelation.

Here theological scholarship gets into trouble, for the natural sciences are perhaps right in what they say--and theological scholarship is also eager to be a science, but then it loses the game here, too. If the whole thing were not so serious, it would be extremely comical to consider theology's painful situation, which it certainly deserves, for this is its nemesis for wanting to be a science.<sup>72</sup>

The confusion Kierkegaard warns against is most recently exemplified by the furor over the "Shroud of Turin." It is hoped by some that scientific testing will date the shroud at 33 AD and indicate that the impression of a body on the shroud was produced by a mysterious burst of energy such as may have occurred at the

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<sup>71</sup> Cited by Stephen Jay Gould, "Exaltation and Explanation," New York Review of Books, 26 (May 1979), 3.

<sup>72</sup> JP III, #2823.

resurrection of Jesus. Christians could then rejoice that the Easter event had been "scientifically proven." But suppose that the date and origin of the shroud are determined to be Jerusalem, 33 AD, although the physical impression is discovered to have been made by chemical reaction with a decomposing body. It is highly unlikely that those same folks would accept the conclusion that Jesus remained dead in his grave.

Kierkegaard presents a similar situation regarding knowledge of the historical Jesus in his tale of the "tyrant historian" in the Philosophical Fragments.<sup>73</sup> Suppose a man in the generation immediately following the life of Jesus had the power to gather all the surviving contemporaries of Christ and subject them to a rigorous inquisition in order to obtain the most precise historical account of Jesus possible. Would he then be any nearer to faith? Kierkegaard suggests that he would not, precisely because he was trying to resolve by quantitative means what can only be a judgment of quality. Contemporary historical criticism of the Bible has essentially the same limits and function as the tyrant historian. It can reconstruct with increasing precision the historical reality of Jesus and the early church, but it cannot determine whether or not Jesus was the Christ. From a quantitative, strictly objective viewpoint, there can be no sufficient grounds either for belief in God or for atheism; for the quantitative dialectic there is only a more or less enlightened agnosticism.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> PF, pp. 114-116.

<sup>74</sup> JP III, #3089.

That the quantitative dialectic produces certain kinds of knowledge is well enough known, but is there a way in which knowledge also applies to the qualitative dialectic? One way to approach the question is to ask, what can be known in a situation of objective uncertainty? Here the contrast of Kierkegaard to Aristotle can be instructive. Aristotle stuck with the objective and demoted the object of dialectical thinking to a kind of proto-knowledge of opinions, chiefly about external events. Kierkegaard, however, sees that our own ethical reality, our experience of values and obligations, our "inwardness" is itself an object of knowledge. It can be conceptualized and is subject to reason and communication. Whatever else his polemical extremes may imply, Kierkegaard's "subjectivity is truth" indicates that it is indeed possible to "know thyself." The qualitative dialectic is a method for gaining knowledge of the knower, and of those aspects of human life that are inherently related to a subject—values, commitments, intentions, beliefs. As he writes in the Postscript, "That my purpose was such and such I can absolutely know to all eternity, for this precisely is the expression of the eternal in me, my very self; but the historical externality a moment later is to be attained only approximando."<sup>75</sup> In the same manner, if I cannot know that a belief I hold is objectively true (in which case it wouldn't be a belief), I can know that it is my belief, how I got it, and what it means to me. In dialogue with other persons, it is possible to gain knowledge of their

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<sup>75</sup> CUP, p. 509.

beliefs and intentions, and in public discourse it is possible to nurture such knowledge on the part of the listener. What is not possible, according to Kierkegaard, is to establish the objective truth of an ethical or religious belief or to create one in another person. These are the boundaries of the qualitative dialectic. But the notion of truth still applies—the truth about a human subject.

Kierkegaard's position represents a real gain for rhetoric, in that discourse which observes a qualitative dialectic is understood to be capable of contributing to the discovery of truth. This is in sharp contrast to sophistical rhetoric which denies any connection between persuasion and truth, or that of Aristotle, which is concerned with shaping opinions and with gaining adherence to such truths as are already known. That Kierkegaard aimed at self-knowledge on the part of his audience was discussed in the first chapter; the qualitative dialectic provides the rational forms and constraints under which he thinks such knowledge is possible. It is not surprising, then, that he calls edification "an aspect of knowledge which ought not to be ignored."<sup>76</sup> Through deliberation over values, analysis of intentions, and through invitations to reveal oneself in concrete actions, Kierkegaard's rhetoric does not offer the truth ready at hand, but engages the listener/reader in discovering it. It is entirely consistent with the "essential relation to the existence of the knower" of the qualitative dialectic that the corresponding form of

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<sup>76</sup> JP II, #1588.

communication produces many different "knowings." A diversity of response to the issues raised by the qualitative dialectic should not obscure the fact that there can be genuine knowledge of human values. The openness of discourse to such diversity is simply evidence that the relation of such knowledge to the individual subject has been preserved.

As Kierkegaard defines it, the task of any thinking individual is to observe the limits of each dialectic and to co-ordinate their results. To dispense with either dialectic leads to a kind of madness. In the Postscript Kierkegaard contrasts the subjective madness of a Don Quixote with the objective madness of an escapee from an asylum who sought to establish his sanity by proclaiming to everyone he met, "The earth is round!"<sup>77</sup> Kierkegaard suggests the limitations of the quantitative dialectic by pointing out that the cure would not consist "in getting him to accept the opinion that the earth is flat." Nor would Quixote be cured by extinguishing his chivalric passion.

Each dialectic has its own characteristic forms of argument. Quantitative arguments are preferred in the degree to which they exclude subjectivity. Among the types of argument Kierkegaard identifies with the quantitative dialectic are probability, comparison, judgments of degree ("more or less," "to a certain extent," little by little), number (how many people do it or think it), and cause and effect (including assessments of consequence, reward or punishment). Since he is primarily interested in the qualitative his discussion of such arguments

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<sup>77</sup> CUP, pp. 174-175.

is largely limited to criticism of their application to ethical-religious discourse. When a well-intentioned scientist finds support for belief in God from "some ingenious design in nature" Kierkegaard finds it "repulsive" because of the underlying confusion.<sup>78</sup> He mocks those who draw support for their faith from the great number of other Christians. They are like an innkeeper who wants to sell more beer, so he sells it at a penny below cost—and then is deluded to think he is succeeding in business by the great quantity that he sells.<sup>79</sup>

Kierkegaard does make some positive use of the quantitative, especially argument by comparison, when he contrasts Christendom with early Christianity. But the qualitative takes over when he considers what the individual Christian's response should be.

Qualitative arguments are correspondingly evaluated with reference to their emphasis on subjectivity and to their exclusion of the quantitative. Kierkegaard gives a negative example in his criticism of the "conceptual confusion" of "preacher prattle":

I heard a pastor preaching on a text about the Ascension. He wanted to emphasize the historical aspect, the historical event, and then he constructed a beautiful climax: the apostles had not only seen this with the eyes of faith . . . but with their physical eyes (competent physical gesticulations). . . . What inexhaustible gibberish! His climax was in fact developed backwards; and in the meantime the idea roars with laughter at him because his sermon does not ascend but descends. . . .<sup>80</sup>

The preacher would have done well to have remembered Jesus' caustic reply to Thomas: "Have you believed because you have seen? Blessed are

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<sup>78</sup> JP III, #2810.

<sup>79</sup> AC, pp. 30-31; CD, p. 61.

<sup>80</sup> JP I, #622.

those who have not seen and yet believe." (John 20.29) Kierkegaard's frequent arguments about the equivocal value of historical contemporaneity with Christ all stem from this qualitative distinction, that believing is higher than seeing because it expresses a relation of the subject to the object of faith.

Since the qualitative dialectic deals with values and a subject's relation to them, it displays a double hierarchy—a ranking of values and an assessment of inwardness. Regarding emphasis on the subject, arguments are preferable that stress the individual over the group, the essential over the accidental, intentions over consequences, obedience over preference, person over act. The ranking of values takes the form of Kierkegaard's famous either/or, where two conflicting values are brought together and one is subjugated to the other in a specific context of decision. We will treat Kierkegaard's rhetorical structuring of these arguments in the next section.

#### Dialectical Forms of Argument

Like most thinkers, Kierkegaard had his own distinctive ways of structuring an argument. Diverse as they are, he nonetheless called them all "dialectical." To sort them out, however, we will make a loose distinction between two ways of looking at dialectic. One is the Aristotelian sense of dialectic as a logic of uncertainty. Arguments constructed according to this view will have a quasi-logical form (as with Aristotle's four sources of dialectical argument, and his use of the "enthymeme," an informal syllogism, in the Rhetoric). The other

sense of dialectic comes from its roots in dialogue, the exploration of ideas through discourse which was a major part of Greek education. It is characterized by a multiplicity of viewpoints on a single subject. The dialogical setting can be internalized to reflect a thinker's "dialogue" with him/herself, or it can be taken up into rhetoric, where the speaker incorporates interaction with the audience into the speech. The multiplicity of perspectives is often resolved into a polarity, from which we get the more familiar notion of dialectic as thinking by opposition. Both notions of dialectic were important to Kierkegaard, and their interaction produces a rich variety of argumentative forms.

#### Quasi-logical Forms.

1. Definition. We have already seen that Kierkegaard employs an intentionally partial form of definition to achieve intensity (see Ch. 2, p. 59), which we called "argumentative definition." When such definitive statements are considered under the larger framework of a discourse or series of discourses, an additional feature emerges, which can be termed "interactive definition." The key terms of the discourse are defined in relation to each other and to a single co-ordinating concept or locus. In Purity of Heart, for example, the locus is "the one and the many." Purity of heart is defined as "to will one thing"; its opposite, despair, is seen as "double-mindedness."<sup>81</sup> The good is that which can be willed as one,<sup>82</sup> and God is called "the One."<sup>83</sup> The

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<sup>81</sup> PH, p. 61.

<sup>82</sup> PH, pp. 54ff.

<sup>83</sup> PH, pp. 50-51.



eternal is the transcendent unity of time, "always appropriate, always present, always true,"<sup>84</sup> whereas the temporal is a multiplicity of moments. Love is "wholly present in each expression,"<sup>85</sup> immortality is "a changelessness that is not altered by the passage of years."<sup>86</sup> By contrast, the "worldly" is a "whirlpool," an illusion of oneness:

It is a sense-deception, as when a swarm of insects at a distance seem to the eye like one body; a sense-deception, as when the noise of the many at a distance seems to the ear like a single voice.<sup>87</sup>

The usefulness of interactive definition is that the significance of a term is enhanced by its relation to the other terms of the discourse. Taken together, they form a coherent pattern which would not be apparent if the terms were given a definition adequate to their full range of meaning in the language. The rhetorical effect of a definition is often a result of this selectivity and its creative interaction with other terms, while still retaining a connection with what is ordinarily meant by the term. The extreme case of such selectivity is the polemical definition, where the term is defined in opposition to its ordinary meaning, e.g., "The Joy of it—that Misfortune is Good Fortune" (one of the discourses in Joyful Notes in the Strife of Suffering). If nothing else, such statements have the effect of intriguing the listeners, making them wonder how the speaker will resolve the obvious conflict. Polemical definition clearly has an element of the dialogical, in that

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84 PH, p. 33.

85 PH, p. 60.

86 PH, p. 35.

87 PH, p. 58. Here we can also note an Hebraic parallelism which is a common stylistic trait of Kierkegaard's: an image for the eye and one for the ear.

the "whole truth" is expected to emerge from the confrontation of the opposing viewpoints.

Another form of definition that Kierkegaard favored may be called "poetic definition." A term is defined by an image, such as Kierkegaard's familiar aquatic images for faith—being suspended over 70,000 fathoms, setting out to sea in a leaky boat. Both the usefulness and the danger of such definitions can be seen in the popularity of the fad started by Charles Schultz: "Happiness is. . . ." As I recall the preachers who seized on this formula, they were often led to making assertions that were theologically indefensible by their poetic zeal in finding images. Kierkegaard insists that in his case at least, the concept precedes the image:

Aided by my imagination—which, please note, is not at all prior to the dialectical, hence immediate, but follows the dialectical—I can grasp all the Christian qualifications in the most faithful and vital way.<sup>88</sup>

The obvious advantage of the poetic definition is that it tends to place an abstract concept in a more concrete situation (which, in the case of faith, is where it belongs).

We should also note here an equally common technique of Kierkegaard's: the refusal to define. As Northrop Frye put it, "the poet does not define his words but establishes their powers by placing them in a great variety of contexts."<sup>89</sup> Many of Kierkegaard's

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<sup>88</sup> JP V, #6061. Compare Bacon's definition: "The duty and office of Rhetoric is to apply Reason to Imagination for the better moving of the Will." Cf. Francis Bacon, "The Advancement of Learning," in his Bacon: Selections (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928), p. 194.

<sup>89</sup> Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 334.

characteristic terms are never defined ("dialectic" included); the reader has to eke out a meaning from the contexts in which they are used. In most cases I think that is what Kierkegaard intended the reader to do—another of his strategies of engagement.

Less frequently, Kierkegaard employs definition in a technical or formal sense as stating what he takes to be the essential nature of that which is to be defined, as in his definition of the synthetic structure of human existence in The Sickness Unto Death. Those who label Kierkegaard an irrationalist generally take "Subjectivity is truth" to be a definition of this type. (I understand it to be polemical.) One of the main difficulties in understanding Kierkegaard is determining whether he is using a term technically, polemically, or poetically—or in some combination of the three.

2. The "archeology" of presuppositions. One way of assessing a proposition is to ask what it implies as a prior condition of its truth. Consider one of Kierkegaard's Thoughts Which Wound from Behind: "Now is our salvation nearer . . . than when we first believed." Kierkegaard quickly notes that in order to make a comparison there must be two points. "Now" is given, so the question becomes, "When didst thou become a believer?"<sup>90</sup> Which raises a prior question: "Didst thou become a believer?"<sup>91</sup> This logical regression is one of Kierkegaard's most characteristic strategems: "Come unto me" presupposes an

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<sup>90</sup> ChD, p. 223.

<sup>91</sup> ChD, p. 224.

understanding of what it is to labor and to be heavy-laden; hope in the resurrection presupposes judgment, since it is "of the just and of the unjust"; "Love your neighbor as yourself" presupposes that you love yourself. In each case he reasons backward to the existential condition that the assurance presupposes.

We have called this process "archeological" (borrowing a term Paul Ricoeur applies to Freudian analysis) because it is not aimed at a simple analysis of logical implication. Kierkegaard uses the logical structure as a bridge to cross over to the situations and intentions under which presuppositions are formed. To those elements of the existential dialectic that are oriented to the future and to a present decision there corresponds a dialectic of memory, or as Ricoeur combines them, "a dialectic of archeology and teleology" by which we come to understand the history of our beliefs and intentions.<sup>92</sup> In "Now is Our Salvation Nearer. . ." Kierkegaard invites the reader to "Test thyself therefore by means of this saying."<sup>93</sup> For a person raised in Christendom the appropriation of Christianity began so early that it "recedes into the fabulous dimness of the nursery-tale."<sup>94</sup> The task of discovering one's Christian presuppositions becomes an archeology of one's own distant past, where Christianity is bound up with parental relations, fairy-tales, and toilet-training. In his discourse on the occasion of a wedding, Kierkegaard adopts the theme "Love Conquers All,

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<sup>92</sup> Paul Ricoeur, The Conflict of Interpretations (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), p. 161.

<sup>93</sup> ChD, p. 227.

<sup>94</sup> ChD, p. 224.

viewed as the resolution that constitutes marriage." For love to conquer all presupposes a struggle, so Kierkegaard gives a long and poignant account of the struggles that wear down a marriage. In the same manner to make a resolution requires "a real conception of life and of oneself . . . a real conception of God,"<sup>95</sup> so he recounts the inward struggle and frank self-assessment required by a resolution to marry. The indirect target of the discourse, however, are those in the audience who have already been through these struggles and perhaps have lost a sense of what their marriage originally meant to them. The discourse is intended to recall them to the love and the resolution on which their marriage was founded by digging back through the years to recover their own wedding vows. This archeological approach was first used extensively by Kierkegaard in "Quidam's Diary," but the themes of memory and the recovery of past intentions recur throughout the authorship.

3. The Existential Enthymeme. Aristotle's name for an informal syllogism in rhetoric was an "enthymeme." Kierkegaard states his divergence from Aristotle by saying that "In the final analysis, what I call a transition of pathos Aristotle called an enthymeme."<sup>96</sup> Kierkegaard is imprecise here, but as he developed this point, the transition of pathos was a metaphorical middle term in a syllogism.<sup>97</sup> It is metaphorical because it doesn't stand for a proposition but for the pathos of an existing human being. To take the standard example,

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<sup>95</sup> ED, ed. Holmer, p. 203.

<sup>96</sup> JP III, #2353.

<sup>97</sup> JP III, #2352.

Major premise: All men are mortal.  
 Minor premise: Socrates is a man.  
 Conclusion: Socrates is mortal.

This becomes for Kierkegaard:

All men are mortal.  
 I am a man.  
 I am going to die.

The transition of pathos is the "leap" from an awareness of other people's deaths to a confrontation with one's own mortality.

Kierkegaard uses this form in a wide variety of contexts. The middle term can be an action, a way of life, a value, or an ethical command. In the introduction to On Authority and Revelation he distinguishes between "premise-authors" and "essential authors." Premise-authors are unable to reach any real conclusions because they lack the necessary middle term, a "life-view," a clear and concrete purpose.<sup>98</sup> In Works of Love we find the following form:<sup>99</sup>

"Postulate": Self-love.  
 "Command" : "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."  
 Consequence: Self-love is "mastered," "wrested away," becomes "proper self-love."

The existential middle term becomes an important hermeneutical tool for Kierkegaard (closely related to the classical concept of ethical proof). He notes that "bread and butter" is the middle term by which people interpret a pastor's proclamations: take no offense; he is only saying these things "because it is his bread and butter."<sup>100</sup> Kierkegaard later gives this formal statement:

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<sup>98</sup> AR, pp. 3-11.

<sup>99</sup> WL, p. 34.

<sup>100</sup> JP III, #3309.

The truly Christian proclamation contains in its major premise that which is proclaimed and has within its minor premise, or as supporting premise, a dialectically qualified existing person (from which we see also how crucial personality is for the true proclamation of Christianity).<sup>101</sup>

As an example, Kierkegaard imagines a rich man who gives all he has to the poor, and then preaches "grace." His existence interprets grace in such a way that it cannot be confused with worldly gain. Of course this is disturbing, "for we want 'grace' to mean we have the right to keep our money." In each of these cases the syllogistic form is not employed because Kierkegaard thinks his points can be logically demonstrated. Instead he uses the persuasiveness, the credibility of logical forms to provide a coherent and binding framework for the extra-logical pathos of human existence.

4. Either/Or: the relations between polar terms. Kenneth Burke makes a helpful distinction between "positive" and "polar" terms.<sup>102</sup> "Table" is a positive term, in that it doesn't imply an opposite such as "un-table" or "anti-table." But "good," "false," "order," "right," "yes" are polar; they imply "bad," "true," "disorder," "wrong," "no." One of Kierkegaard's concerns in his qualitative dialectic was to maintain the polar nature of anthropological and value terms against a "slovenly positivity," for when the negative drops out values and subjective states are treated as things.

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<sup>101</sup> JP III, #3513.

<sup>102</sup> Kenneth Burke, The Rhetoric of Religion (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), p. 23n.

Thinkers can often be characterized by the pairs they choose and by their techniques for combining or distinguishing the members of the pair. Some pairs characteristic of Kierkegaard's thought are temporal/eternal, infinite/finite, belief/doubt, subject/object, change/continuity, spiritual/worldly, Christianity/Christendom--the list is a long one. This habit of thinking in paired or polar terms is probably the most common feature that we associate with dialectical thought. The important thing about such pairs is the way they are related to each other or to a third term which serves as a ground of comparison; to call them opposites is not sufficient. For example, good/bad can be related aesthetically or ethically. Within ethics alone the pair can be related as both/and, if we are describing a person's character, or as either/or if we are facing a choice. Kierkegaard says it is a parody of the ethical to do the reverse--to judge persons as good or bad and to judge the same action as good and bad. The nature of the disjunction changes according to how it is applied. Kierkegaard's pairs will be better understood if we look first at their forms of relation to one another, and then at their co-ordination with a third term.

The primary notion of "either/or" indicates a relation of mutual exclusion: either the aesthetic or the ethical as a lifeview. Only one of them can be the organizing viewpoint for one's life. The clearest case of mutual exclusion is in particular choices. Either you marry or you don't; vote for one candidate or another. Compromise on such



choices, perhaps by an "open marriage," is an evasion of their ethical character. As Kierkegaard puts it:

All relative contrasts can be mediated. . . . Personality will for all eternity protest against the idea that absolute contrasts can be mediated; . . . for all eternity it will repeat its immortal dilemma: to be or not to be—that is the question.<sup>103</sup>

To see Kierkegaard's point we need only to try a Hegelian mediation of Hamlet's question:

Either: I will kill myself.  
Or: I will embrace life.  
Mediation: I will simply injure myself.

A second form of polarity is absolute/relative, the biblical "no man can serve two masters." As Kierkegaard says in a discourse on this text, "There is an either/or: either God/or . . . the rest is indifferent."<sup>104</sup> Unlike the relation of mutual exclusion, the "or" in this case is not nullified, but stands in a subordinate relation to the absolute. In choosing God over "the world" you still cannot do away with the world. The choice is a determination of how God and world are to be related. A similar form of disjunction is higher/lower. This is most clearly seen in the elements of the human synthesis: eternal/temporal, freedom/necessity, infinite/finite. Here there is an underlying both/and, in that no human existence can escape either term in the polarity without falling into despair. But neither are the terms equal; every choice will express a valuation of one term over the other.<sup>105</sup> The predominance of the higher/lower relation in

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<sup>103</sup> JP III, #1578.

<sup>104</sup> ChD, p. 333.

<sup>105</sup> Cf. Malantschuk, pp. 125-126.

Kierkegaard's discourses tends toward the creation of a realm of spiritual values and a realm of worldly values which are then played off against one another. However, the form of the disjunction is not either spiritual/or worldly, but

spiritual or worldly  
worldly spiritual

Finally, there is a form of polarity that can be expressed as both/or neither. God-relationship/individuality is one of the most important for Kierkegaard, but we may include faith/works, faith/risk, consciousness of sin/forgiveness, and individual/community. In each case the meaning of the first term is completed and set in balance by the second (we could also call this a binary form of interactive definition). Kierkegaard's treatment of the problem of faith and works is illustrative. Without faith there is nothing as intentional as a "work" implies; there is only busy-ness. Conversely, although we are saved by faith, faith only comes into existence at the point of action; we understand and appropriate faith through works. Faith and works are thus correlative terms. Other correlative relations are doubt/despair ("Doubt is a despair of thought, despair is a doubt of the personality . . .")<sup>106</sup> and consolation/rigor ("The law is: the greater the rigorousness, the greater the consolation."<sup>107</sup>).

Kierkegaard's main technique for relating his pairs to a third term (or to a situation) can be expressed by another pair:

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<sup>106</sup> E/O II, 215.

<sup>107</sup> JP III, #3502.

association/dissociation, which corresponds to Aristotle's use of differences and likenesses.<sup>108</sup> The process of association brings together concepts which have been separated:<sup>109</sup>

faith/existence ———> existing in faith.

Dissociation turns a synthesis into an opposition:

Culture Christianity ———> Christ or culture.

There can also be both an associative and dissociative relation to the same term, as with the pair Christ/believer. We are related by dissociation to Christ as Savior, but associatively to Christ as prototype. Kierkegaard likens himself to Luther: as Luther used the law, Kierkegaard used Christ as prototype "in order to preach men to bits so that they turn to grace."<sup>110</sup> "Preaching to bits" is an apt image for dissociation, as is "turning toward" for association.

Kierkegaard frequently combines the two processes, dissociating a concept from one term of a pair and associating it with the other. For example, he relates the idea of "habit" to the pair change/continuity. Habit is ordinarily understood as a continuous or unchanging aspect of personality: "But the fraud of habit is that one

<sup>108</sup> Other "dialecticians" use similar pairs. Paul Sponheim, Kierkegaard on Christ and Christian Coherence (New York: Harper & Row, 1968) uses the terms synthesis and diastasis to characterize the "rhythms" of Kierkegaard's thought on the major pair God/humanity. Kenneth Burke chooses "merger and division" in A Grammar of Motives (Berkeley: University of California, 1961, pp. 402ff.) Karl Barth's characteristic terms are affirmation and negation. I have taken association/dissociation from Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, p. 190.

<sup>109</sup> Cf. CUP, p. 473; the task of existence is "to put things together," and Plato's "He who can see things in their connexion is a dialectician," the epigram to Malantschuk's book.

<sup>110</sup> JP II, #1857.

remains unchanged, that one says the same thing, while in fact he is utterly changed and says it in an utterly different way."<sup>111</sup> Creatures of habit "seem unchanged but actually are wasting away in the inner man."<sup>112</sup> In a similar way, Kierkegaard relates compassion to the pair self/other. Compassion, he says, is ordinarily understood as a form of selflessness, an immediate sympathy for another person's troubles:

One dare not in a deeper sense think of such troubles, and so one spares oneself by compassion. Only when the compassionate person is so related by his compassion to the sufferer that in the strictest sense he comprehends that it is his own cause which is here in question . . . only then does compassion acquire significance.<sup>113</sup>

Compassion is dissociated from sympathy for the other and associated with concern for oneself. The same dissociative/associative processes are applied to the relations between two pairs, such as belief/doubt and knowledge/passion: "Belief and doubt are not two forms of knowledge, determinable in continuity with one another, for neither of them is a cognitive act; they are opposite passions."<sup>114</sup> In each of the three examples above the dissociative phase of the argument serves to break down commonplace understandings or at least to raise a question in the reader's mind, which is then answered by a surprising new association. This process provides the dominant dialectical form for many of Kierkegaard's discourses, especially The Gospel of Suffering and the first two parts of the Christian Discourses, where the pair

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<sup>111</sup> CLA, p. 81.

<sup>112</sup> CLA, p. 80.

<sup>113</sup> CD, p. 107.

<sup>114</sup> PF, p. 105.

spiritual/worldly is used to interpret the pairs joy/suffering, poverty/wealth, lowliness/highness, and presumption (pride)/self-torment. In other cases either the dissociative or the associative pole dominates. The Attack on Christendom is almost entirely dissociative, while the discourses on "Our Common Humanity" are associative. Training in Christianity has the form associative/dissociative/associative, corresponding to the three parts "Come Hither," "The Offense," and "He will draw all unto Himself." Since they are complementary processes, however, when one pole dominates the other remains as an undertone.

Dialogical Forms. As a general rule, we are more apt to be convinced by a dialogue in which we are participants than by a monologue which is directed at us. In the normal course of a speech questions and objections are raised in the listener's mind which are held in suspension until the conclusion of the speech, where we expect them to be resolved (or hope they won't be, if we are antagonistic to the speaker). Capable speakers anticipate this tension and the urge toward dialogue by providing an opportunity for actual audience response, or when this is not possible, by a rhetorical substitute for it in the speech itself. Kierkegaard uses the latter technique extensively in his discourses, and we can identify three major forms: direct address, question and answer, and refutation. In addition, he uses more indirect forms of dialogue by portraying a person's inner thoughts or employing speeches by a number of stock characters, which I have called dramatic dialogue.

1. Direct address is most noticeable when it takes a hortatory tone:

"My hearer, this hour is now soon past, and the discourse. Unless you yourself will it otherwise, this hour and its discourse will soon be forgotten."<sup>115</sup> What is more important for sustaining the illusion of dialogue, however, is the recurrent use of "I," "you," and "we."

Kierkegaard made a special point of this in his first lecture on "The Dialectic of Ethical and Ethical-Religious Communication":

One of the tragedies of modern times is precisely this—to have abolished the "I," the personal "I." For this very reason ethical-religious communication is as if vanished from the world. For ethical-religious truth is related essentially to personality and can only be communicated by an I to an I.<sup>116</sup>

Kierkegaard at first used a poetic "I" in his pseudonyms and a hypothetical "I" (similar to the anonymous "one") in his earlier discourses; e.g., "If I am to be rich, I must indeed possess something, and that which I possess is accordingly mine."<sup>117</sup> By the last discourses, in For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourself, we find him speaking very much in his own voice: "I myself feel only too deeply how wretched and mediocre is the thing I seek to attain, but for all that there is some sense in it."<sup>118</sup> The important factor in using direct address dialectically is not biographical, however. Hortatory and personal asides do not ordinarily advance an argument; they often call attention to the fact that personal address has been left out of the body of the discourse. What Kierkegaard strives for is an ongoing

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<sup>115</sup> FSE, p. 239.

<sup>116</sup> FSE, p. 239.

<sup>117</sup> ChD, p. 32.

<sup>118</sup> JFY, p. 156.

dialogue in which the argument is couched in personal terms and the audience is a silent partner, "converting the speech into a conversation."<sup>119</sup> This dialogical framework is as essential to Kierkegaard's dialectic as a definition of terms is for logical argument.

2. Question and answer is an important link between ordinary dialogue and dialectic. It provided the format for scholastic dialectic and was used more recently by Paul Tillich in his method of correlation. As we noted earlier in this chapter, the main subject of dialectic is that which is "questionable." A common sermonic form is to begin with a question and answer it in the sermon. By contrast, a dialectical argument frequently is aimed at no more than a deepening and elaboration of the question with which it began. As Kierkegaard wrote in the Fragments, "The condition for understanding the Truth is like the capacity to inquire for it."<sup>120</sup> Kierkegaard's dialectic of question and answer has the initial aim of developing this capacity to inquire. He tries to move the reader from the point at which the Fragments began: "The question is asked in ignorance, by one who does not even know what can have led him to ask it"<sup>121</sup>—to attaining "the transparency that is a condition for being able to put the question to himself and for

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<sup>119</sup> ED III, 69.

<sup>120</sup> PF, pp. 17-18.

<sup>121</sup> PF, p. 9.

being able to answer it" for himself.<sup>122</sup> The dialectical problem is first one of getting the audience to perceive the questions correctly:

. . . for the art of questioning is simply the dialectical aspect of the art of answering (and if it is said that a fool can ask more questions than seven wise men can answer, the wise men deserve the apology explaining that they cannot answer because the fool cannot question).<sup>123</sup>

As we might expect, Kierkegaard's usual approach is to existentialize the question—"Does God exist?" becomes "Do you believe?" Or he substitutes a question with a task. In Works of Love he gives an explicit account of this technique:

If anyone asks, "What is love?" Paul answers, "It is the fulfilling of the law," and straightway every further question is precluded by that answer. . . . This mode of answering, to swing away from the questions, orientation towards the remote in order instantaneously to bring the task to the questioner—what he has to do, as near to life as possible—is characteristically Christian.<sup>124</sup>

The existential version of "What is love?" is "How can I learn rightly to love?" This is the question Kierkegaard then takes up in the discourse. The essential thing for a speaker is to know which questions to reject, which to answer, and which to put to the audience.

As with direct address, many of Kierkegaard's questions to the audience are essentially hortatory, taking the form "Now you know what to do; will you do it?" In a few cases the questions come in such rapid succession and are so much a restatement of the themes of the discourse that they resemble a small catechism.<sup>125</sup> Other forms of questioning,

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<sup>122</sup> PH, p. 183.

<sup>123</sup> JP I, #754.

<sup>124</sup> WL, p. 103.

<sup>125</sup> Cf. PH, pp. 187, 195, 197; ChD, p. 55.



however, make more a direct contribution to the argument. Kierkegaard's frequent injunctions to "ask yourself" or "go out into the world and observe" are a way of bringing in the listeners' experience as evidence. A question can state a proposition in such a way that it also invites the audience's assent: "If two people are to love each other in sincere faith, is not a prior requirement in each individual of honesty before God just what is needed?"<sup>126</sup> Or a question can be used to introduce a new topic: "With whom does a man have his most intimate relationship. . . ? Is it not with God?"<sup>127</sup> Kierkegaard often relates question and answer as point/counterpoint: "Is it only. . . ? Is it not also. . . ?" In less than two pages from which these examples were taken, Kierkegaard asks and answers ten questions. The effect is one of a dialogue carried along by the new questions raised by each previous answer.

3. Objection and Refutation is a dialogical form similar to question and answer. This technique was emphasized in Roman rhetoric due to its setting in courts of law. You state your client's case and then refute the arguments against it. In a speech where there is no actual cross-examination (except silently in the minds of the listeners) the speaker has to be both prosecutor and defender. It is basically a matter of strategy to decide how much refutation to include. If some important objections are not addressed, the audience is likely to

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<sup>126</sup> WL, p. 150.

<sup>127</sup> WL, p. 151.

conclude that the speaker has not thought the matter through. But if the speaker can't answer the objections, he or she is probably better off keeping silent. Kierkegaard offers the prudent advice never to raise more doubts than you can answer.<sup>128</sup> Too much refutation, however, and the audience is likely to lose the intital point or think the speaker to be needlessly cantankerous. In sum, the standards for refutation in dialogue and dialectic are different from those in logic and philosophical discourse. The point is to present just enough to be convincing and to enhance the quality of dialogue, not to secure one's position for all time.

Kierkegaard employs objection and refutation not only defensively but also offensively, to cut off possible misunderstandings and misappropriations of the message. In "Love Conquers All" the two uses are set side by side, first the defense, introduced by "But perhaps someone says . . ." (repeated three times)—and then the offense: "If someone thinks . . . If someone thinks . . . Is there anyone who thinks . . . ?"<sup>129</sup> We should also note the less obvious forms Kierkegaard uses: "It is true that . . . but the question is . . . ," "But perhaps . . . Well, then . . ."<sup>130</sup> Even though many of Kierkegaard's "objectors" are clearly straw men, set up only in order to be knocked down, the technique does sustain the illusion of dialogue remarkably well. He has woven into the discourse a running debate with

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<sup>128</sup> JP I, #779.

<sup>129</sup> ED, ed. Holmer, pp. 186, 188, 193, 195, 204, 206.

<sup>130</sup> ED, ed. Holmer, pp. 206, 207.

the audience. Not surprisingly, refutation appears most frequently in the more polemical discourses; in a devotional discourse such as "The Unchangeableness of God" it is almost entirely absent.

4. Inward dialogue. As we noted in chapter one, one of Kierkegaard's aims was to awaken "the preacher within," to speak as if it were the listener's own voice. The dialectical element in this self-dialogue consists in showing how meanings change in the course of a person's experience and reflection. Kierkegaard's numerous psychohistories are a case in point. The three discourses on the lilies of the field ("Our Common Humanity") employ the figure of "the troubled one," showing how his concern is inwardly transformed by considering the lilies and the birds. In "Courage in Suffering" he tells of a youth "well instructed in the truth" (Christianity) and how his experience changes him, so that "becoming older he learns something quite different, although he still, nevertheless, merely knows the truth."<sup>131</sup> In both cases, Kierkegaard makes his point by portraying the inward development of his characters and relating it to the biblical text, showing how its meaning changes with the changes in their experience. A variation on this technique is his use of the child, youth, and old man to portray the different meanings of suffering, obedience, and faith in each period of a person's life.

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<sup>131</sup> GS, p. 147.

5. Dramatic dialogue. Kierkegaard loved the theater, and his sense of the interchange between characters in a drama appears in his religious discourses. We hear many voices other than Kierkegaard's. A man goes into a field, and suddenly he is talking with birds and lilies, and they in turn are talking among themselves. In "The Anxiety of Lowliness" the cast of characters includes a Christian, a pagan, and a bird:

"What! . . . lowly . . ." says the bird, "let us never think of such things, one flies away from them!" "What . . . lowly," says the Christian, "I am a Christian!" "Alas, lowly!" says the heathen. "I am what I am," says the bird. "What I shall be is not yet revealed," says the lowly Christian; "I am nothing, and I come to nothing," says the lowly heathen.<sup>132</sup>

In Training in Christianity the cast is expanded to ten, each of whom is an imagined contemporary of Christ. A "wise and prudent man," a clergyman, a philosopher, a statesman, and a "solid citizen," all give their opinions of Jesus, pointing out his virtues and deficiencies.<sup>133</sup> Yet these are really nineteenth century voices. Kierkegaard has created a setting where representative Danes speak openly without "the affected and formal reverence we indolently conform to in speaking of Christ."<sup>134</sup> And they are all distinct voices, each speaking from a coherent point of view.

A dramatic form is well suited to Kierkegaard's dialectic. Ideas are presented as they reside in personalities, and the conflict of ideas in dialectic is reproduced by the dramatic conflict of characters. Also like drama is the manner in which the conflict of ideas points

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<sup>132</sup> ChD, p. 49.

<sup>133</sup> TC, pp. 45-55.

<sup>134</sup> TC, p. 44.

toward a resolution. Kierkegaard's voices do not simply state options; they ask the reader to take sides, to form his/her own resolution to the conflict—although he rarely leaves much doubt as to what he thinks the resolution should be. The dramatic form is most fully realized in Kierkegaard's stories and parables, where a specific situation carries the burden of meaning. The dramatic dialogue is a midpoint between direct address and story, in that the audience is addressed by a group of characters, but there is no dramatic action and little interchange among the speakers; the focus is on their ideas, and the dramatic conflict is in the mind of the audience as it confronts a juxtaposition of opposing viewpoints. There are other rhetorical advantages: the speaker is able to attack the opinions of the audience indirectly by placing them in the mouth of a third party; the audience in turn confronts the issues of the speech in a form that is more consonant with their daily experience than a discursive presentation would ordinarily allow. Clearly the skill in characterization Kierkegaard developed in his pseudonymous works was not wasted on the religious discourses.

The importance of dialectic for Kierkegaard's rhetoric should now be apparent. One of his principal aims was to promote Christian self-understanding. By shaping his dialectic to the self-dialogue of human consciousness, he was able to construct a "logic" of subjectivity which could be used in the discourses to guide people in thinking about themselves and their convictions. At the same time, he applied this criterion of subjectivity to the various scholarly disciplines in order to clarify their role in the formation of self-understanding and the

justification of convictions, and in order to identify the special epistemological problems posed by Christianity. This latter aspect of his dialectic is in effect an attempt to state the "rules of evidence" for Christian discourse.

We will further explore the rhetorical applications of Kierkegaard's dialectic in the next two chapters, but the general point to be observed here is the strict continuity between Kierkegaard the dialectician and Kierkegaard the rhetorician. With his dialectic he established to his own satisfaction the "tremendous justification" demanded behind "the force of eloquence": to follow the forms of thought that are appropriate to "existing subjective thinkers," to keep within the epistemological limits of the subject, and to translate it all into a fitting verbal or literary form. It is a different task from theological scholarship, but just as rigorous, just as demanding of clear and consistent thought. As Kierkegaard understands it, dialectic should enable us, with art and imagination, "to present the truth in its truest form."<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> JP I, #656, p. 297.

## Chapter IV

## THE CHRISTIAN ART OF ADDRESS

A new practical training course ought to be introduced for theologians (something I have noted in one of the earliest journals): practice in the Christian art of address, specifically not in the art of preaching, rhetoric, and everything belonging to it, but in the art of being able to preach—Christianity. For with respect to communication Christianity has a singularity which brings entirely unique categories into force.<sup>1</sup>

As must surely be clear by now, Kierkegaard stands in that branch of the rhetorical tradition which insists on maintaining the relationship between inquiry into the truth and its mode of expression. That is what his call for a distinctively Christian art of address implies, and that is why it has been necessary to deal in some detail with the anthropological and dialectical concepts that are foundational to his rhetoric. The anthropology provided "the knowledge of men" needed "to illuminate Christianity,"<sup>2</sup> and we at least have the dialectic in mind, if not "at our fingertips," as Kierkegaard insisted.<sup>3</sup> It now remains to add the third and final source of Kierkegaard's transformation of rhetoric—the "entirely unique categories" of Christianity.

Kierkegaard perceived that the failure to adapt rhetoric to the distinctiveness of Christianity had led to serious distortions in preaching. Preachers had adopted aesthetic standards of eloquence;

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1 JP I, #669.

2 JP I, #64.

3 SD, p. 135.

"eloquence is essentially sophistic; sophistry consists in the displacement of appropriate action by eloquence."<sup>4</sup> The problem with Christian preaching that strives after eloquence is that "It amounts to being elevated for an hour once a week just as in the theater, and the disaster is that people get used to hearing everything without having the remotest notion of doing something."<sup>5</sup> This kind of preaching indicates that the speaker has confused the preaching of Christianity with acting or entertaining, and the congregation is only too pleased to regard itself as audience to a performance. This was not a recent development. Augustine and Chrysostom complained that their sermons were interrupted by applause from an audience accustomed to speech-making as a form of public entertainment. The problem from Kierkegaard's perspective is that the form of the speech and the relation between speaker and listener contradicts the message. Christianity is an "existence-communication" which demands strenuous action and inward transformation on the part of the listener. It cannot be appropriated from an aesthetic distance.

When preachers were not entertaining their "audiences," they were lecturing them, and this too is a contradiction of Christianity:

And hence one sees what a monstrous error it is, very nearly the greatest possible error, to impart Christianity by lecturing; and how Christianity has been changed by this perpetual lecturing may be seen in the fact that all expressions have been constructed in view of the notion that truth is understanding, knowledge (one constantly talks of comprehending, speculating, reflecting, etc.),

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<sup>4</sup> JP I, #681.

<sup>5</sup> JP I, #675.



whereas in primitive Christianity all expressions were constructed with a view to truth as a form of being.<sup>6</sup>

Unlike the aesthetic mode of preaching, the didactic approach may be at least consistent with itself if the speaker believes that Christianity consists in intellectual assent to right doctrine. But Kierkegaard thinks this is an intellectual disease of Christendom which is only spread to epidemic proportions by preaching. Both the aesthetic and the speculative/didactic approach relate to Christianity by standing back and looking at it (as their respective Greek and Latin roots imply). If Christianity is a form of existence, one understands it only by existing in it, and helping someone by means of a sermon to understand Christianity must mean helping them enact it.

If Christianity is to be presented "in its truest form" the rhetorical approach must be derived from Christianity itself. In this chapter we will present four aspects of Christianity that, in Kierkegaard's view, necessarily alter the "dialectic of communication" in Christian preaching. Kierkegaard's "constant reference" to Aristotle's Rhetoric in this undertaking is not as constant as his preliminary notes might have led us to expect, but classical rhetoric provides a useful contrast nonetheless.

#### THE PRESENCE OF GOD IN CHRISTIAN DISCOURSE

Christianity introduces a third party into the discourse. There is no longer just the speaker and the audience. God is assumed to be

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<sup>6</sup> TC, p. 202.

present and active in the rhetorical situation. The difficulty lies in understanding how God acts, and how this action is related to the role of the preacher.

In classical rhetoric the speaker was assumed to be in control of the communication, if not the outcome. Aristotle understood the domain of rhetoric as all the means of persuasion that are at the disposal of the speaker. Special messages from the gods were reserved for oracles, where the human agent was conceived simply as a medium, having no personal contribution or responsibility.

Christian preaching has a problem here. It is caught between oracle and oratory. As the deliverance of a message from God it is not a human art, and therefore falls outside the sphere of rhetoric; as a persuasive speech by one person to others it cannot escape rhetoric. Jerome felt the bind when God told him in a dream "Thou art not a Christian; Thou art a Ciceronian." The problem was resolved by Augustine and the early medieval arts of preaching by baptizing pagan rhetoric, declaring it to be one of the human means God uses for God's own purposes. The problem for the preacher was further alleviated when God's communication was handed over to the sacraments and to ecclesiastical councils for interpretation. The preacher's function was then more strictly rhetorical; medieval preaching ad populum was predominantly moral hortatory or persuasion to participate in the means of grace offered by the church.

The Protestant emphasis on sola scriptura threw the problem of God's communication back into the pulpit, and with it the problem of

divine versus human rhetoric. In their efforts to resolve the issue, both Calvin and Luther emphasized the "oracular" aspect of preaching: the Word of God is the word as it is preached and heard under the prompting and confirmation of the Holy Spirit; the Spirit comes in and through and not without the preached word. The efficacy of preaching was held to be dependent upon the inward confirmation of the Holy Spirit in each listener; as Luther put it, God "must speak it in my heart, or nothing at all will come of it."<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the confirmation of the Spirit was not related to the prior spiritual condition of the listener: "God's word comes to me without any help or preparation on my part."<sup>8</sup> But the inward word of God comes only through the outward words of the sermon, and here, too, the Spirit was presumed to be at work in calling and guiding the preacher.

It should be noted that Luther and Calvin had polemical concerns in making these assertions. Emphasis on the passivity of the listener was meant to defend justification by faith, to keep faith from becoming a spiritual work. Tying the word of God to the sermon was directed against the left wing of the Reformation and the notion of an "inner light," which both Luther and Calvin saw as antinomian.

Yet the reformers' solutions left the preacher in a difficult situation. God's communication was at least minimally dependent on what the preacher said to the congregation, but it was not to be identified

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<sup>7</sup> Luther, WA 10<sup>III</sup>, 260; cited in Paul Althaus, The Theology of Martin Luther (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1966), p. 39.

<sup>8</sup> Luther, WA 12, 497; cited in Althaus, p. 41.

with the rhetorical effect of the sermon. The preacher was to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit, but by its very nature the Spirit could not be translated into a homiletical method. The result has tended to be a bifurcation in protestant preaching between the theology of preaching and its rhetorical practice. This split was perhaps unavoidable. As long as God is conceived to be an agent in the sermon itself, there can be no basis for a Christian adaptation of rhetoric. To do so would be idolatrous, a usurpation of God's free agency. (There can, of course, be a theory of God's rhetoric, which is surely one way of describing Luther's thought on the matter.) Protestant preachers continued to use rhetorical devices, not because it was theologically justified, but because it was necessary.

How, then, can we speak of Kierkegaard's "Christian rhetoric"? We can do so, and find that Kierkegaard was justified in developing such a rhetoric, because Kierkegaard denies that the sermon has a central role in communicating the word of God. Nowhere does he identify preaching as a necessary channel through which God's word must be communicated. Instead, he reverts to a position more like that of the medieval popular preachers (he was particularly attracted to Abraham of Santa Clara) and the Lutheran pietistic tradition, that preaching is for spiritual guidance and moral awakening. To see how Kierkegaard arrives at this position, we first need to look at how he conceives of God's word and God's communication, and then to see where preaching fits in.

We can take our first clue from a note in one of the journals: "There is a God; his will is made known to me in Holy Scripture and in

my conscience."<sup>9</sup> That conscience is the focal point of God's communication should be understood in light of Kierkegaard's anthropology, specifically in what we have called the locus of equality. God has created everyone with an orientation toward the ethical-religious, so that there is an innate possibility of a God-relationship. To put it another way, everyone has a conscience; conscience "is the human being himself in the sense of limits, but also in the sense of root and ground"<sup>10</sup> (here recall the "grounding" in God in The Sickness Unto Death). It is with reference to conscience as a person's deepest sense of identity before God that we can understand Kierkegaard's puzzling statement in "The Dialectic of Ethical and Ethical-Religious Communication," that "Every human being knows the ethical."<sup>11</sup> Kierkegaard's main concern here is to point out what happens to the idea of communication when the object is something that everyone knows, namely oneself and one's own conscience:

How then, is the dialectic of communication changed?

1. The object drops out, for since we all know it, there is no object to communicate . . .
2. The communicator drops out—for if everyone knows it, one person cannot communicate it to another.
3. The receiver drops out—for if the communicator drops out, the receiver goes also.

There remains only one communicator: God.<sup>12</sup>

Kierkegaard's position is easier to understand if we keep in mind that the conscience is primarily the sense of being alone before God, so

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<sup>9</sup> JP II, #1960.

<sup>10</sup> JP II, #1348.

<sup>11</sup> JP I, #649, p. 271.

<sup>12</sup> JP I, #649, p. 272.

there is really no possibility of another person's sharing directly in the communication.<sup>13</sup>

In Kierkegaard's view the presence of God is equivalent to being aware of God. He avoids causal terminology here, either in claiming that God intervenes in our consciousness or that we "invite" God into our hearts—to receive the Spirit is to "become spirit" and vice versa—but he clearly emphasizes our responsibility for the quality of our awareness. Thus when he speaks of the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost there is not a hint of the ecstatic self-transcendence that Christian piety often attributes to it. On the contrary, "in the Christian sense inspiration is in the first instance to become sober."<sup>14</sup>

What this indicates for the communication of the ethical-religious is that it is first and foremost a matter of coming to yourself before God, that it is primarily an act of communication between God and the individual conscience. The direct intervention of a preacher could only be an intrusion:

And in the house of God thou dost get to know the truth—not from the parson, whose influence thou canst, and in a certain sense shalt evade, but from God or before God.<sup>15</sup>

We can get a sense of what Kierkegaard means from the common complaint, "Don't preach to me!" Of course this can be an evasion, meaning "Don't challenge me. Don't tell me what I don't want to hear." But it can

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<sup>13</sup> The idea is not unique to Kierkegaard; Augustine had argued in an early treatise, De magistro, that only Christ "teaches within the mind." Augustine, The Teacher (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1964), p. 185.

<sup>14</sup> FSE, p. 115.

<sup>15</sup> ChD, p. 179.

also mean "Don't violate my conscience, my integrity, by trying to force upon me a decision which can only be my own. Don't try to insinuate your opinions into my relationship with God." For Kierkegaard, God communicates only as Spirit to spirit, and therefore only to individuals. To conceive of the Spirit as mediated by one person to another, perhaps through "inspired preaching," would require an act of faith equivalent to faith in Christ. Few preachers can claim this kind of inspiration, and when they do Kierkegaard wonders if it isn't an aesthetic rapture at their own performance.

And so when they speak movingly about a pastor's feeling the need to preach; when he has not preached for a month or two he feels an emptiness, a great void, etc.—well, no wonder that he who is spoiled by such weekly esthetic intensifications during which in an inspired mood he exaltedly moves and is himself moved by depicting faith, hope, love, noble deeds, the blessedness of suffering, etc.—no wonder that he feels a void; when a person is addicted, it is not so easy to do without alcohol.<sup>16</sup>

And when congregants attribute such inspiration to their preachers, they fall under the same suspicion. Kierkegaard's admonition is "Be ye therefore sober" and "Judge for yourselves!"

That God is the only communicator Kierkegaard applies in a general way to all ethical communication, but Christianity requires an important qualification:

Ethically man as such knows about the ethical, but man as such does not know about the religious in the Christian sense. Here there must be the communication of a little knowledge first of all—but then the same relationship as in the ethical enters in.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> JP III, #3488.

<sup>17</sup> JP I, #650, p. 279.

Christianity is not innate; you first have to "hear about it." Here scripture enters in as the authoritative witness, the content and the boundaries of God's communication. Kierkegaard does not use "word of God" as a technical term or a special category. On the relatively few occasions that he uses it, it refers to Christ or the Bible,<sup>18</sup> but I have found no sense in which he refers God's word to the sermon.

To be sure, the preacher is preeminent among those who provide the "little knowledge" that is needed to become a Christian, but he or she is not alone in this role. In Christendom, people have learned more than enough from parents, teachers and friends, from personal Bible reading and other Christian authors. "There is no lack of information in a Christian land."<sup>19</sup> What each person is to make of this information is to be decided in the confrontation of scripture and conscience. In contrast to the reformation model of communal hearing of the word Kierkegaard asserts that a person must dare to be alone with the scriptures. In a journal entry entitled "The Bible—for the 'Single Individual'" he uses a favorite analogy of the love letter from God:

Would it ever occur to the recipient to be concerned about how others will interpret this letter, or will he not read it all alone?

Suppose now that this letter from the lover has the distinctiveness that every human being is the beloved—what then? Is the intention now that they should sit and confer with one another, not to speak of dragging along the scholarly apparatus of countless generations?

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. JP I, #215; JP III, #2911, #2912; FSE, "The Mirror of the Word," pp. 39ff.

<sup>19</sup> CUP, p. 542.



No, the intention is that each individual shall read this letter before God solely as an individual, as the single individual who has received this letter by God or from God!

But it was soon forgotten that this letter is from God and entirely forgotten that it is to the single individual. The race has been put in his place. And therefore we have completely lost the impression of the Bible.<sup>20</sup>

As Kierkegaard concludes in "The Mirror of the Word," "he who is not alone with God's Word is not reading God's Word."<sup>21</sup> Of course Kierkegaard does not demand that we be physically alone, although he does suggest that rather than listening to a steady stream of "preacher prattle," it might be a good idea to go home, close your doors, and read the Bible. The contrast to Luther is striking: "For God will not come to you in your private room and speak to you. He has therefore arranged that the external word shall be preached and go before."<sup>22</sup>

On the face of it, Kierkegaard's demotion of preaching appears to leave even less place for rhetoric than the reformers did. But the demotion is precisely the point. Only when preaching is conceived as a completely human activity can there be any question of an art of rhetoric, because only then are we free to speak our own word. Preaching is still distinguished from speech-making, not because it conveys God's word, but because it is a response to God's word; and it is a response that requires the fullest use of our merely human talents. With this understanding, Kierkegaard writes, "Now follows a new

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<sup>20</sup> JP I, #213. See also JP III, #2865, #2872, #2907.

<sup>21</sup> FSE, p. 55.

<sup>22</sup> Luther, WA 17<sup>II</sup>, 459f; cited in Althaus, p. 37.

conception of communication."<sup>23</sup> If the preacher "drops out" as a mediator of God's communication, his/her role can only be indirect:

The communicator always dares influence only indirectly, (1) because he must always express that he himself is not a master-teacher but an apprentice and that God, on the other hand, is his and every man's master-teacher, (2) because he must express that the receiver himself knows it, (3) because ethically the task is precisely this—that every man comes to stand alone in the God-relationship.<sup>24</sup>

Kierkegaard thus conceives of the sermon as a secondary communication in two senses: it is the preacher's response to God's primary communication, and it is an aid to the listener's formation of his/her own response.

In Kierkegaard's view of the pastor's response, the criterion for speaking is shifted from inspiration (either as a divine call to preach or as special insight into the message) to an ethical requirement. The preacher must express that he/she is a fellow-listener with the audience, one who is also questioned and judged by the message: "If someone were to say to men: You ought to act ethically, it is as if God were heard speaking simultaneously to this important man: Nonsense my friend, it is you who must do it."<sup>25</sup> The honest preacher "lets God keep the thunder and the might and the glory; he talks in such a way that though everything were to go amiss he is sure nevertheless that there is one auditor who is seriously moved—the speaker himself."<sup>26</sup> Whether preaching judgment or grace, the preacher makes sure "that the

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<sup>23</sup> JP I, #649, p. 272.

<sup>24</sup> JP I, #649, p. 273.

<sup>25</sup> JP III, #649, p. 273.

<sup>26</sup> SLW, pp. 419-420.

admonitions obligate him before they go on to somebody else, that the comfort and the truth do not depart from him . . . in order to be communicated the more lavishly."<sup>27</sup> Kierkegaard does not insist that the preacher must have achieved the ideals he/she preaches about--only Christ could truly meet such a standard. He merely insists upon honesty:

Everything you communicate which is existentially higher than your own existence you dare communicate only in such a way that you use it to your humiliation, in such a way that no meritorious light falls on your saying it.<sup>28</sup>

Kierkegaard himself carefully adhered to this principle, either by the use of a pseudonym (Anti-Climacus) to express what he had not attained, or by constant admissions that his discourses applied first to himself and that he was far from living up to the message he proclaimed: "I say it to my own shame."<sup>29</sup> We will have more to say about this personal requirement on the preacher under the heading of reduplication in the next chapter. What we want to emphasize here is that the sermon should indirectly express the word of God by reflecting the preacher's own struggle with it.

There are also limits to be placed on the importance of the preacher's personal appropriation for the listener. The speaker must take pains to see that his/her personal influence does not destroy the secondary role of the communication. Here it may be necessary to

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<sup>27</sup> SLW, p. 420.

<sup>28</sup> JP III, #3694.

<sup>29</sup> FSE, p. 38.

"thrust them away from oneself in order to win them for the truth."<sup>30</sup>  
 This is not as easy as it sounds. You can say "Don't look to me; look to Christ," and people will admire you for your humility. Kierkegaard is endlessly resourceful in finding techniques to keep potential followers at a distance—which is just the dialectical opposite of his powers of persuasion:

Equipped with an inborn talent for tactics, able to win everyone to myself with my knowledge of men, etc., I dare not utilize the least of these for my cause, for then it would be as if God said to me: I see! You want to steer yourself—well, then, I do not need you. In my mind it is absolutely just as important to express this truth that God is along as it is for the truth to be presented.<sup>31</sup>

By "truth" I take Kierkegaard to mean his version of it, so that the sense of this passage is that the counter-persuasive techniques of distancing apply in two complementary ways: away from the listener to avoid misplaced imitation, and away from God, to keep the sermon distinct from the primary communication. There is an inherent tension in this situation. Kierkegaard certainly wants his cause to be God's cause, and he wants to win people to it, but not to himself. Therefore he maintains a tension on the Godward side by emphasizing God's presence as the judge over his discourses, and he expresses his intention toward the listener paradoxically: "To stand alone—by another's help."<sup>32</sup>  
 This tension between persuasion and counter-persuasion is for Kierkegaard one of the distinctive features of Christian communication.

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<sup>30</sup> JP I, #649, p. 275.

<sup>31</sup> JP II, #1375.

<sup>32</sup> JP I, #650; WL, p. 256.

How, then, does the preacher help the listener to stand alone and to frame his/her own response to God's primary communication? All of Kierkegaard's strategies of indirect communication properly fall under this heading (see Ch. 5), but a few remarks on the relation of preacher, listener, and God in indirect communication are in order here. Perhaps the most illuminating image that Kierkegaard develops is drawn from the theater. As God is the true communicator, so is God the true audience. In contrast to the aesthetic relationship, where the preacher is compared to an actor and the congregation to an audience, the religious situation is this:

In the most earnest sense, God is the critical theater-goer, who looks on to see how the lines are spoken and how they are listened to . . . The speaker is then the prompter, and the listener stands openly before God. The listener, if I may say so, is the actor who in all truth acts before God.<sup>33</sup>

In keeping with the image, the preacher does not take center stage and begin to declaim, but rather sits in the wings and "prompts by whispers; he is the inconspicuous one, he is, and wishes to be overlooked."<sup>34</sup> Kierkegaard often speaks of the whisper (in contrast to Luther's "shouted word") as the proper tone of the sermon.<sup>35</sup> It corresponds to the "secret" of inwardness, to a desire not to interrupt the listener; the whisper is speech to an individual. If the preacher speaks "for awakening," it is still possible to awaken someone with a

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<sup>33</sup> PH, p. 181. Compare Augustine, De Magistro, p. 185: "And because they are quick to learn internally following the prompting of the one who speaks, they think they have learned externally from the one who was only a prompter."

<sup>34</sup> PH, p. 180.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. JP III, #3521; WL, p. 200.

whisper as well as a shout, and with less chance of utterly disorienting them—provided one gets close enough.

As for the listener, he/she is understood to be preaching inwardly with the aid of the sermon's prompting. The situation is not essentially different from corporate prayer: the liturgist speaks aloud, but the real prayer is presumed to be occurring within each congregant. I say "presumed" because of course there is no guarantee that the person isn't really thinking about Sunday dinner—but so be it; in such a prayer the person is simply saying to God: "ham . . . peas . . . mashed potatoes." Mental drifting and free association are perhaps inevitable and can be a good thing if an earnest concern manages to bubble up from our inward stew. Kierkegaard's point is that this is all part of the sermon from the listener's side. From memory and hope, from the biblical text and the on-going speech of the pastor and in an intermittent awareness of God's presence, the listener constructs a sermon.

Few people actually hear and absorb all that a preacher says, and they probably couldn't be doing their own inward work if they did. As a subordinate communication the sermon need not be designed to be heard in its entirety, anymore than a prompter reads all the lines of the play; the idea is to present just enough to keep the actor on the right track. The ultimate effect of any sermon, even a bad one, depends upon the listener:

It is the product of your own activity that for your own sake the talk is helpful to you; and it will be because of your own activity

that you will be the one to whom the intimate "thou" is spoken . . . Alas, above all let us not be drawn away from the decision by any attention to the speaker and the artistry of the talk.<sup>36</sup>

Kierkegaard the rhetorician is not just slyly demeaning rhetoric here in order to conceal his tactics. He is speaking of the counter-rhetoric of listening. If the speaker drags the sermon off into aesthetics, it is still the listener's responsibility whether he or she will receive it religiously. Even the worst of sermons can and should be transformed by the listeners for their own edification. As Kierkegaard says, "It is of equal merit to be a good speaker and a good listener."<sup>37</sup>

#### THE PARADOX OF CHRIST

Christ, the object of faith, is a paradox. Kierkegaard notes that "All the ancients . . . were unanimous, as were the later ones who thought about the matter, that the potency of eloquence is based upon probability."<sup>38</sup> The rhetorician succeeded by convincing the audience that the object of the speech was probably true. All rhetorical techniques were designed to enhance the probability of the thesis and to refute the arguments against it. Christianity, however, is paradoxical, and even if it is true it is still improbable. Kierkegaard concludes that "Christian eloquence will be distinguished from the Greek in that it is concerned only with improbability, with showing that it is improbable, in order that one can then believe it."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> PH, pp. 178-179.

<sup>37</sup> JP I, #630.

<sup>38</sup> JP I, #824.

<sup>39</sup> JP I, #628.

It is easy enough to recognize Kierkegaard's point in the abstract. No thoughtful person would find it probable that God should become a Jewish carpenter's son or that after being executed he should rise from the dead. But given enough centuries, enough believers and theologians, the wild unlikelihood of Christianity is obscured:

Christianity is now made probable—and so eo ipso the rhetoricians flourish. With reasons and reasons, they are able to depict and depict and bellow and make all Christianity so probable, so probable—that it most likely is no longer Christianity.<sup>40</sup>

Kierkegaard thinks that the result of Christianity's success in gaining adherents has been an unwitting reversion to the categories of pagan rhetoric. To prove his point Kierkegaard threatens to take a pagan speech, insert Christ's name here and there, and pan it off as a sermon "published at the request of many."<sup>41</sup> He is confident no one would notice.

The temptation of preachers to perpetuate this mistake is perhaps understandable, for Christianity deprives them of a major means of persuasion by eliminating argument from probability. Moreover, Christianity allows for no degrees of agreement. The classical orator could settle for the tacit approval of an audience; there could be degrees of assent corresponding to degrees of probability. But for Christianity there is simply an either/or: either you believe or you don't. It demands an ultimate commitment. In addition the preaching of Christianity is itself caught in a paradox. The more convincing the

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<sup>40</sup> JP I, #824.

<sup>41</sup> TC, p. 112.



sermon and the more people come to believe in the paradox, the less paradoxical and the more probable it seems.

Kierkegaard's conclusion is that under these circumstances the Christian address must work against itself, that it must attract and repel at the same time. As he develops this idea in Training in Christianity, it centers on the concept of offense as essential to the encounter with Christ. Not that a preacher should personally offend the listeners (although there may be a time for that as well), but that the sermon must raise the possibility of offense at Christ: "That He must be the sign of offense in order to be the object of faith!"<sup>42</sup> The preacher needn't labor to make Christ the offense—that is inherent in the paradox, whether one is offended that a man should be called God, or that God should be conceived in the form of a despised and suffering servant. All that is necessary is to bring about a situation of contemporaneity so that the listener cannot be insulated by the centuries of belief, the theological support system, or the reassuring company of other believers. The preacher doesn't need to defend or explain Christ, but simply to convey an honest sense of his presence. Honesty in this case means indirect communication. That is, not to depict Christ as one who is directly recognizeable, in whom we already believe, but as one who demands a present act of recognition: faith or offense.

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<sup>42</sup> TC, p. 100.

Offense is a negative counterpart of persuasion. Any urging of new valuations can also be seen as an attack on existing ones. The potential for offense can be measured by how deeply the existing values are held, by their relation to the audience's self-understanding, and by the perceived dissonance between them and the new values that are being advanced by a speaker. Of course, there are techniques available to the speaker for presenting the new as compatible with the old and thereby reducing the possibility of offense. Paul's speech to the Athenians on the unknown God is an excellent example. For Kierkegaard, however, Christianity is marked by its incompatibility with ordinary human values—the infinite qualitative difference—and therefore cannot avoid the possibility of offense. Even Paul's artful concessions couldn't keep some Athenians from scoffing at the resurrection. As an attack on values, offense is also related to motives, for in a certain sense values are objectified motives. For this reason, it is appropriate to relate Kierkegaard's types of offense to the motivational structure of his anthropology.

As Kierkegaard outlines the three types of offense, there is the pre-religious offense at Christ's conflict with the established order, the offense at "highness" (that a man should be God), and the offense at lowliness (that God should be a despised and suffering man). The first type of offense can be related to the aesthetic stage and to prudential ethics: Christ is an offense to the worldly quest for happiness and its institutionalized forms. This is not essentially religious, because anyone can be an offense in this way, and any Christian should. The

fact that this is still a common form of offense within Christian churches supports Kierkegaard's claim that Christendom is essentially paganism. The conflict can be smoothed over by domesticating Christ to the values of one's own culture, but this is an indication that the real religious issue has not been faced.

The offense at highness appears as a metaphysical problem to those with a speculative bent—the problem of the two natures. But Kierkegaard emphasizes the existential aspect, which centers on the forgiveness of sins as the crisis of the ethical stage: is Jesus God that he can really forgive my sins?<sup>43</sup> The possibilities for offense here vary with the degree of consciousness of sin. As a youth I found it difficult to imagine that my paltry sins could warrant Jesus dying for them—so I resented Jesus for taking them so seriously. At the other end of the scale is that chief among sinners who is convinced that his or her sins are so great that even God could not forgive them, nor could Jesus' death be efficacious. Either way, the offense is well expressed by a line from a recent song: "Jesus died for somebody's sins, but not mine." Finally, we should add a particularly devious form of the offense at highness which masquerades as admiration: Jesus was a great man who expressed the ethical ideal, but the claim to be God is simply an exaggeration on the part of overly zealous followers.

The third form of offense is one to which avowed Christians are particularly subject: the offense at lowliness, usually accompanied by

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. SD, p. 214; JP III, #3029.

a theology of glory. We sneak furtively past Good Friday and arrive bright and cheerful on Easter morning. We are offended that the God to whom we owe our love and gratitude should suffer at the hands of the unrighteous; we want Jesus to come back and zap the unbelievers, or at least to show them what fools they are. We want only to "Praise the Lord!" When the crucifixion is mentioned it is as the great panacea. Jesus died for my sins; to require anything more of me by way of imitation is to demean the Cross of Christ. In most congregations we can find the potential for any of these varieties of offense. Taken together, they constitute a complex web of conflicting motives and resentments directed from one aspect of the Christian tradition against another, lying in wait to trap the unsuspecting preacher.

The natural tendency of the orator is to mediate, to minimize the conflicts. But since the varieties of offense are derived from the paradoxical nature of Christ, to remove the offense is to remove Christianity, as Kierkegaard never tires of pointing out. He observes that a straightforward recommendation of the joy of Christian living easily turns into its opposite, hedonism:

They say, for example, that there are two ways—the way of desire and the way of virtue—they describe the first as strewn with flowers, etc.; the other as rigorous in the beginning, but little by little . . . here the preacher suddenly forgets himself and virtue's narrow way, for his description of virtue's way little by little becomes seductive. What then? The result is that a sensualist is not only crazy for not choosing the way of virtue but that he is a crazy sensualist for not choosing the way of virtue . . . One gladly listens to such a discourse, for it prevents acting.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> JP I, #631.

Remove the offense to the motive of happiness, and Christianity appears as sanctified hedonism.

Kierkegaard's solution is to attack. As a psychotherapist seeks points of resistance in the client and then sets to work on them, Kierkegaard locates the possibilities of offense and seeks to bring the issue to a head. His goal is "by means of the possibility of offense to form the opposition out of which faith can emerge so that the individual chooses faith."<sup>45</sup> If there is no opposition, there is no choice. The opposition, however, is not a matter of conflicting motives. The key to the rhetoric of offense is that it sets a single motive in conflict with itself; it accentuates ambivalence to the breaking point. In Kierkegaard's words, it attracts and repels at the same time, until the tension is broken by the listener's choice. The Gospel is a "two-edged sword" which should never be preached without a proper warning:

We put our confidence in frankly daring to recommend Christianity along with the postscript that its reward, putting it most mildly, is ingratitude from the world. We regard it as our duty always to speak out at the time, so that we do not sometimes recommend Christianity by the omission of some of its essential difficulties and at other times . . . hit upon a few grounds of comfort for the person who has trials in life. No, precisely when Christianity is recommended most strongly the difficulty must simultaneously be presented. It is unChristian whining if anyone thinks: let us in every way win men for Christianity . . .<sup>46</sup>

Kierkegaard here extends the counter-persuasive techniques to the Gospel that we earlier applied to the personal influence of the preacher. It would be a mistake to assume, however, that this

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<sup>45</sup> JP III, #2878.

<sup>46</sup> WL, p. 187.

constitutes a negation of rhetoric, although it certainly contradicts the Aristotelian tradition. By developing a rhetoric of paradox and offense Kierkegaard is simply being true to his subject, for no one should come to Christianity out of ignorance or with unclarified motives. Moreover, he is being realistic. No one can long be fooled by a gospel of success that preaches Christian sweetness and light—unless they are fooling themselves. The preacher who "indulges in allurements" may be accused of bait-and-switch tactics, for the listeners soon enough find out that they are not getting what they bargained for.

#### THE SINFUL LISTENER

The listener is assumed to be a sinner, and therefore not neutral to Christianity, but in some sense opposed to it. Classical rhetoric assumed an essential openness to the truth. As Aristotle put it:

Rhetoric is useful . . . because things that are true and things that are just have a natural tendency to prevail over their opposites, so that if the decisions of judges are not what they ought to be, the defeat must be due to the speakers themselves, and they must be blamed accordingly.<sup>47</sup>

Compare Kierkegaard:

Essentially the truth must be regarded as polemic in this world. The world has never been so good, and so good it will never be, that the majority will the truth or have the true conception of it so that upon its proclamation it promptly and necessarily wins the approval of all. No, he who wills in truth to proclaim something true must prepare himself in some other way than with the

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<sup>47</sup> Aristotle, Rhetoric, 1355a, 21-24.

aid of such a beguiling expectation; he must be willing essentially to relinquish the moment.<sup>48</sup>

The assumption of a polemical relation to the truth is perhaps the single most important factor in the shaping of Kierkegaard's rhetoric. It is essential to his notions of indirect communication and maieutic and was a major reason for his use of the pseudonyms. Much of Christian preaching has shared this assumption theologically, but it has often failed to take account of it rhetorically. Karl Barth's preaching was once described as throwing the Gospel like a stone. From Kierkegaard's perspective, the problem with that approach is that people tend to duck or to equip themselves with catcher's mitts. It becomes necessary to throw curves, or to "attack from behind." We will try to show how Kierkegaard does this in the next chapter, but first we need to define the problem more clearly.

Kierkegaard makes the assumption that all people, including Christians, are sinners. Sin is not ignorance, as the Greek tradition had it, but lies in the will.<sup>49</sup> The fact that we are sinners affects the way we hear the Gospel, so that misunderstanding must be attributed to unwillingness to understand rather than inability to understand.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, the main struggle in preaching is with the will, and not with the intellect. A case in point is the way preaching deals with doubt:

It is claimed that arguments against Christianity arise out of doubt. This is a total misunderstanding. The arguments against Christianity arise out of insubordination, reluctance to obey,

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<sup>48</sup> WL, pp. 336-337.

<sup>49</sup> SD, p. 226.

<sup>50</sup> JP I, #185.

mutiny against all authority. Therefore, until now the battle against objections has been shadow-boxing, because it has been intellectual combat with doubt instead of being ethical combat against mutiny.<sup>51</sup>

Doubt, in Kierkegaard's view, is an act of will,<sup>52</sup> and therefore cannot be resolved by a little more knowledge. To link doubt to the will implies that there are always motives for doubting, and these motives are what the preacher has to work with if he or she is to remove the doubt. Kierkegaard thinks that few people doubt Christianity simply out of a sincere concern for the truth; mainly they doubt in order to avoid the consequences of belief.

Willful misunderstanding of a sermon or biblical text is not essentially different from doubt. It consists of a verbal acceptance accompanied by an inward rejection or distortion:

The confusion constantly centers in the fact that while the pastor is preaching the listener is substituting a lower level of thought and the pastor has no intention of snatching him out of it.

Take an example. The pastor preaches on the words: Christ did not rail and rant back when he was abused. He preaches about our doing just the same . . . The listener listens devoutly and concludes something like this: If I do what the pastor is saying (not rail and rant back), then surely it will go well for me in this world.<sup>53</sup>

That the listener must be assumed to be actively engaged in misapprehending the message means that "the communicator must have eyes in the back of his head with regard to the actual appropriation of the communication."<sup>54</sup> By accounting for the motives of the listener, it is

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<sup>51</sup> JP I, #778.

<sup>52</sup> JP I, #776.

<sup>53</sup> JP III, #3527.

<sup>54</sup> JP I, #649, p. 276.



possible to anticipate misunderstandings and work to circumvent them. The preacher in Kierkegaard's example needs to include the warning that if you do not "rail and rant back" at those who abuse you, it will only provoke them further.

I.A. Richards held that rhetoric "should be a study of misunderstanding and its remedies."<sup>55</sup> This is not far from Kierkegaard's position. The difference is that Richards puts the emphasis on clarity, on direct and unambiguous speech. Kierkegaard shifts the emphasis to the misunderstandings generated by the listener. His anthropology was designed in part to provide him with the diagnostic apparatus that such a conception of rhetoric requires.

Classical rhetoric encouraged the speaker to make use of the listeners' motives only to the degree that they contributed to agreement with the subject of the speech. This technique is not unknown to Christianity. Pascal satirized the Jesuit program of "directing the intentions." Since people won't mend their ways, the solution is to baptize their motives: "But teach them how to change the intention, by attributing a Christian motive to these same un-Christian acts."<sup>56</sup> Where the speaker's purpose is simply to gain consensus, this is a perfectly legitimate technique. Christianity, however, is concerned with the transformation of the motives themselves. As Kierkegaard puts it:

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<sup>55</sup> I.A. Richards, The Philosophy of Rhetoric (New York: Oxford University Press, 1936), p. 3.

<sup>56</sup> Cited by Kenneth Burke, A Rhetoric of Motives (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), p. 157.

Christianity by no means presupposes a direct need and desire for Christianity in the natural man (be he profound or simple) and therefore believes that it must itself command every man to become a Christian, for otherwise he never becomes one.<sup>57</sup>

The motives that would lead a person to Christianity are not ready at hand. As a consequence, the preacher must work to bring the motives of self-interest and righteousness to ruin in a consciousness of sin.<sup>58</sup> Only then can the motives of forgiveness and gratitude come into play—motives that are generated by Christianity itself.

There is an additional consequence of sin for the work of the preacher: to "relinquish the moment." In a law court or a political debate, the speaker does everything possible to win the issue at the moment. If the judge has a change of heart after the sentencing, that is ordinarily of little help to the condemned criminal. Christianity differs in two important ways: it presupposes a corrupt judge (the congregation), and the trial continues every Sunday, if not every day.

Regarding the first point, a Christian preacher should expect to "lose the case" more often than not. Kierkegaard frequently remarks, not without a touch of bitterness, that any time the majority agree with you, you're probably in the wrong as a preacher of Christianity.<sup>59</sup> A less polemical way of saying it is that the congregation should have to struggle with the preacher's sermons, mostly because the sermons should make them struggle with themselves. This will not make a preacher popular, but Kierkegaard suggests that a popular preacher of

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<sup>57</sup> JP III, #3477.

<sup>58</sup> CF. JP IV, #4018.

<sup>59</sup> JP III, #2502.

Christianity is a contradiction in terms. What is required, he says repeatedly, is self-renunciation, "fear and trembling," "real self-denial."<sup>60</sup> To preach the Gospel may also mean to be persecuted; but at the very least it means to give up seeking immediate approval in favor of effecting real long-term change. Kierkegaard cites Luther on a similar point:

Luther makes a superb observation on the great draft of fish: the apostles got it not because of their toil and labor--no, on the contrary they got it only after they had labored and toiled in vain.<sup>61</sup>

Like the apostles, a preacher is not ready to preach Christianity unless he or she is willing to be counted as a failure.

This brings us to the second point. The ordinary preacher has much the same audience week after week, and for that reason doesn't need to be in a hurry about getting the message across. A remark of Kierkegaard's about authorship is pertinent here:

This is why no one dares move ahead slowly, because every author regards himself as one who is up for examination; he fears that someone will think that he does not know much. Since existence itself is dialectical, it is a matter of situating every element in such a way that it makes its impression. In order to grasp the forgiveness of sins, I must first and foremost have the impression of consciousness of sin in confession of sin. Now the point here is to do this with penetrating relevance, and then not a word more. But the speaker or the thinker fears or is ashamed that someone might think that he does not know very much, and therefore he must say it all at once. In this way the whole impression is vitiated.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> PV, p. 26; WL, p. 188.

<sup>61</sup> JP III, #2505.

<sup>62</sup> JP I, #637.

A preacher I know was hotly condemned among his congregation for preaching too much on social issues and not enough on their "spiritual needs." Every week there was something on militarism, racism, or the just demands of the poor. Some members petitioned their bishop to remove him. But when enough members began to show concern and take action on those issues, his sermons took on an almost pietistic tone. He had concluded that they had finally heard him, and that he could move on to other aspects of the Christian life. He had shown the courage not to say too much.

#### THE DIALECTIC OF AUTHORITY

The pastor uses authority: "To preach simply means to use authority."<sup>63</sup> There are two meanings of authority that must be kept distinct if Kierkegaard's position is to be understood. One is the power or right to command either obedience or assent to certain beliefs. The other is related to special knowledge or expertise, much as one speaks of an "authority" on medieval literature. The first concept of authority has a long and complex history in Christianity, but four main grounds of authority can be identified: scripture, tradition, the consensus of the present Christian community, and personal experience (the emphasis here upon the "witness of the Holy Spirit"). Although there has been constant disagreement over which of these should have priority, there is agreement that all such authority derives from God,

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<sup>63</sup> PA, p. 97n.

and that the human use of authority first requires an "authorization." For a pastor this ordinarily comes in the form of ordination. Kierkegaard constantly emphasized that he was "without authority" since he lacked ordination, and therefore couldn't preach sermons, only "discourses." This distinction should not be taken without reservation, for Kierkegaard does in fact employ argument from authority, as we shall see.

The second sense of authority is the form most commonly found in classical rhetoric. The opinions of persons held in esteem by the audience are invoked in support of the thesis. Who can be used as an authority will depend on the epistemological criteria of the audience. Medieval rhetoric relied heavily on the authority of antiquity, following Aristotle's prescription that "ancient witnesses" are most trustworthy.<sup>64</sup> Since the Enlightenment the concept of authority in argument has been held suspect because it appears to bypass reason. Yet it still is commonly employed in public discourse whenever an argument is enhanced by reference to who said it. H.G. Gadamer outlines the basis for this form of authority:

Authority . . . is based ultimately, not on the subjection and abdication of reason, but on recognition and knowledge—knowledge, namely, that the other is superior to oneself in judgment and insight . . . This is connected with the fact that authority cannot actually be bestowed, but is acquired . . . Authority in this sense, properly understood, has nothing to do with blind obedience to a command. Indeed, authority has nothing to do with obedience, but rather with knowledge.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Aristotle, Rhetoric, 1376a, 17-18.

<sup>65</sup> H.G. Gadamer, Truth and Method (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), p. 248.

By this conception, any authority to command obedience rests on a prior recognition of superior knowledge or expertise. Even when authority is institutionalized, it is assumed that persons occupy positions of authority by virtue of their qualifications. Some reference to this form of authority is probably indispensable in that few people have the time or the ability to make an independent investigation of every issue. Most pastors have this type of authority in their own congregations by virtue of their theological education; they in turn defer to their seminary professors or other professional theologians. The point to be observed is that the authority of theological expertise is qualitatively the same as for any other human discipline.

Kierkegaard's objection to the role of authority in his time is that the two grounds of authority, the human and the divine, have become confused. "Everything is talk-talk about genius and talent and studies and eloquence of speech and the fit of the pastoral gown."<sup>66</sup> People listen to their pastors not because they are responding to God's word but because they are eloquent, clever, or well educated. Pastors listen to theologians for the same reasons. The result is that, hidden under the clerical or academic gown is a strictly human standard of authority. The confusion is only made worse when it is claimed that a pastor is called because God recognized his or her latent abilities. This simply collapses the distinction between divine and human authority.

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<sup>66</sup> JP III, #3477.

To distinguish the types of authority, Kierkegaard compares the extreme types of each in a section of his Book on Adler, "Of the Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle." What would happen, he asks, if we honestly applied human standards of excellence to Paul?

As a genius St. Paul cannot be compared with either Plato or Shakespeare, as a coiner of beautiful similes he comes pretty low down the scale, as a stylist his name is quite obscure—and as an upholsterer: well, I frankly admit I have no idea how to place him.<sup>67</sup>

The point is that none of these standards properly apply to Paul in his essential character as an apostle.<sup>68</sup> Kierkegaard then lists three distinctions between a genius and an apostle:

(1) Genius may, therefore, have something new to bring forth, but what it brings forth disappears again as it becomes assimilated into the human race . . . ; the Apostle has, paradoxically, something new to bring, the newness of which, precisely because it is essentially paradoxical, and not an anticipation in relation to the development of the race, always remains . . . (2) Genius is what it is of itself, i.e. through that which it is in itself; an Apostle is what he is by his divine authority. (3) Genius has only an immanent teleology; the Apostle is placed as absolute paradoxical teleology.<sup>69</sup>

Kierkegaard's first point is that the Christian paradox is not subject to further development. It cannot be assimilated to the common stock of human knowledge, and therefore it nullifies any distinctions of genius, talent, or intellectual ability. One cannot become an expert on the paradoxical. As we suggested in the last chapter, the work of the

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<sup>67</sup> PA, p. 90.

<sup>68</sup> Paul apparently made a similar distinction by separating what he understood to be a "command of the Lord" from his own opinion: "Now concerning the unmarried, I have no command of the Lord, but I give my opinion as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy." (I Cor. 7.25, RSV)

<sup>69</sup> PA, p. 91.

intellect in relation to the paradox is negative. It strives to maintain the paradox in the face of the changing conditions under which it is apprehended. The point for a rhetorician to observe is that "genius" in any of its forms cannot get any nearer to establishing that the paradox is true, and therefore cannot serve as a basis of authority, if authority is derived from knowledge. The truth of Christianity is in no way enhanced by what Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, or Soren Kierkegaard had to say about it—although they may make it more intelligible.

The second point concerns the standards by which authority is established. "Genius" is evaluated for its profundity and originality. What happens when these criteria are applied to Christianity? I have heard a number of theologians whom I respect emphasize the importance of a theological statement by calling it "profound." I think they mean that the statement expresses something that is essential to Christianity and of great personal interest. But "profundity" is also very enticing to an inquisitive mind; it is just what the intellect lusts after. Kierkegaard suggests that this interest in profundity is really a cover for intellectual embarrassment at Christianity: "All this nonsense about profundity—what else is it but a way 'this wicked generation' . . . has of being ashamed of Christianity, of being ashamed of Christ."<sup>70</sup> Kierkegaard's objections are not simple anti-intellectualism. If profundity and intellectual acumen became the standards for preaching, it is not difficult to see how Christianity would be distorted into a wisdom cult. It is also likely that it

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70 JP I, #184.



wouldn't fare very well. Kierkegaard compares the simple Christian proclamation of eternal life (admittedly not as simple as he makes it out to be) to the corresponding Platonic doctrine. The Christian version is:

We have Christ's word for it that there is an eternal life; and that settles the matter. There is no question here of racking one's brains or philosophizing, but simply that Christ said it, not as a profound thinker but with divine authority . . . On the other hand, take the case of a man who racks his brains and ruminates profoundly on the question of immortality: would he not be justified in denying that this direct statement is a profound answer to the question? What Plato says on immortality really is profound, reached after deep study; but then poor Plato has no authority whatsoever."<sup>71</sup>

If Christ is to be compared to Plato as a thinker, one cannot blame the Greeks for calling Christianity foolishness. Kierkegaard's argument is deceptively simple and he repeats it in countless variations throughout his authorship. The authority of Christianity rests solely on the command of God, which is given its decisive expression in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. No human reasoning can be adduced either to support or refute this authority, because God transcends the reasons. The consequences for preaching follow directly:

A priest who is quite correct in his discourse would, when quoting the words of Christ, have to speak in this way: "These words were spoken by Him to whom, according to His own statement, is given all power on heaven and earth. You who hear me must consider within yourselves whether you will bow before his authority or not, accept and believe the words or not. But if you do not wish to do so, then for heaven's sake do not go and accept the words because they are clever or profound or wonderfully beautiful, for that is a mockery of God."<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> PA, pp. 102-103.

<sup>72</sup> PA, p. 104.

The authority employed by a pastor is not his or her own but Christ's; it is not acquired but bestowed, and does not derive from any form of human superiority. It is in all important respects the opposite of Gadamer's conception of human authority.

At this point most thoughtful persons will have a few objections to raise. Kierkegaard's concept of authority looks like a formula for fundamentalism, for the blind and unthinking obedience Gadamer rightly condemned. It is easy enough to emphasize obedience to the command of God, but how are we to know what that command is? For the command does not come directly from Christ to the believer. "Christ says" must be expanded to include "the Bible says Christ says," but then "the pastor says the Bible says," etc. Add the scholarly and critical apparatus, and there is yet another filter, and the authority of the command becomes increasingly dissipated. Furthermore, if expertise is eliminated, what criteria are left to the church for the selection of pastors? The church has been poorly served by the host of crackpots and incompetents who have claimed a call from God.

Kierkegaard's answer to these questions lies in the dialectical structure of his authorship: "Dialectical as my nature is, it always looks as if the opposite thought were not present—but just then it comes forth strongest."<sup>73</sup> The material on authority and revelation was developed as the other side of his position in the Postscript, where he demonstrated that the authority of scripture, church, and tradition was

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<sup>73</sup> JP II, #1852. (Walter Lowrie's trans.).

entirely equivocal from an objective standpoint. Authority, like the obedience of faith it demands, must be conceived as a subjective problem. Authority is dialectical:

Thus it was for a long time believed that one could keep dialectics away from faith, by saying that its conviction rested upon the basis of authority. If the believer was asked about his faith, i.e. if he was dialectically challenged, he would declare with a certain easy air of confidence that he neither could nor needed to give any account of it, since his trust reposed in others, in the authority of the saints, and so forth. This is an illusion. For the dialectician has merely to shift his point of attack, so as to ask him . . . what authority is, and why he regards just these as authorities. He is then not questioned about the faith he has on the basis of his confidence in these authorities, but about the faith he has in these authorities.<sup>74</sup>

If a person bases his or her faith in Christ on the authority of scripture, the question arises as to the basis of scriptural authority. If the answer is the apostolic witness to Christ, we then have a circular argument. Add church and tradition, and the circle is enlarged, but a circle it remains. The uncertainty confronting faith remains regardless of the form of authority to which it appeals. Faith, and authority with it, always has this character:

. . . the omnipresence of the dialectical. Let it be a word, a proposition, a book, a man, a fellowship, or whatever you please: as soon as it is proposed to make it serve as a limit, in such a way that the limit is not itself again made dialectical, we have superstition and narrowness of spirit . . . As soon as I take the dialectical away, I become superstitious, and attempt to cheat God of each moment's strenuous reacquisition of that which has once been acquired.<sup>75</sup>

Here the decisive feature of Kierkegaard's concept of authority comes to light. In an "undialectical" concept of authority there can be a

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<sup>74</sup> CUP, p. 26n.

<sup>75</sup> CUP, p. 35n.

transfer of responsibility from the one who obeys to the one who commands. In a pinch, it results in excuses such as "I only know what I've been told" or "I was only following orders." Kierkegaard's formulation leaves each person responsible for any appeal to divine authority and for whatever form their obedience takes. Abraham could appeal to a revelation from God, yet had he sacrificed Isaac, Kierkegaard holds he would have been justly condemned for murder. Even Adler is not condemned for claiming a revelation, only for his effort to escape the consequences by appeasing church authorities.

The same criterion applies to the pastoral use of authority. What contemporary rhetoricians Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca say of argument from authority is pre-eminently the case with religious discourse: "the person invoking an authority commits himself: there is no argument from authority without some repercussion on its user."<sup>76</sup> Here is Kierkegaard's substitute for expertise as a human criterion for authority: obedience. Pastor or apostle receive their commission to preach by a divine calling, but whatever authority may attach to them personally is based on the correspondence of their existence to the message they proclaim. "This, their unconditioned obedience, is the form of their authority. They use the authority and appeal to God, but they also support it with their unconditioned obedience."<sup>77</sup> If the preacher is not obedient, the pulpit simply becomes "a place for

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<sup>76</sup> Chaim Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, The New Rhetoric (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), p. 307.

<sup>77</sup> JP I, #187.

bringing charges against oneself."<sup>78</sup> In Kierkegaard's dialectical terminology, this is the requirement of reduplication (see below, Ch. 5). Appalling though it may seem to a humble pastor, Kierkegaard has fixed on the criterion of authority that is appropriate to Christianity as he understands it. Christianity is an existence-communication, not a philosophy, and it can be communicated "only by witnesses: that is, by those who existentially express what is said, actualize it."<sup>79</sup> It should be noted that witnessing, even to the point of martyrdom, does not prove the truth of Christianity; it simply demonstrates that the witness is serious and means what he or she says.

This existential requirement also affects the form in which the divine command is brought to bear upon the listener. Kierkegaard says repeatedly that the pastor must deliver a "You shall" to the listener. But the curious fact is that he rarely completes the phrase: "You shall . . . what?" I think the reason is that he doesn't conceive of pastoral authority as the power to command specific actions, or even to enforce a particular interpretation of scripture. For the content of the divine command is not complete in the words of the Bible or the sermon. To be a command there must be a specific context of obedience. Preaching and faith alike require a situation.<sup>80</sup> The situation is the concrete existence of each listener, which no preacher can know well enough to warrant claiming divine authority for an explicit command. He or she

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<sup>78</sup> JP III, #3520.

<sup>79</sup> JP III, #3499.

<sup>80</sup> AR, p. 9; JP II, #1142.

must confront the listeners with God's absolute claim on their lives, but in such a way that each listener's inwardness and freedom are preserved.

To conclude this section, we may note that Kierkegaard's treatment of authority is a model of his approach to Christian doctrine. He acknowledges the principal forms by which authority is exercised in Christianity, but renders them all "dialectical." In so doing he constantly turns the believer away from objectifying any form of authority and toward the constitutive act of faith in God. Likewise in the other three explorations of "Christian categories" discussed above, he tries to define the dialectical limits of each problem, and then examines the existential situation of the person caught within them: God's communication emerges in the confrontation of scripture and conscience, the paradox of Christ presents a choice of faith or offense, the wages of sin in human understanding generate a struggle between honesty and self-deception. Kierkegaard's concern throughout is with Christianity as it is communicated and appropriated, and whatever interest he has in Christian doctrine is subordinated to this concern: "Doctrine . . . must be traced back to the struggle of the anguished conscience . . . The anguished conscience understands Christianity."<sup>81</sup>

It is in this context that we can understand Kierkegaard's claim that an art of preaching should be introduced "in place of dogmatics." For Kierkegaard dogmatics is an objective approach to Christianity, an

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<sup>81</sup> JP III, #2461 (citing Luther).

attempt to define what it is in a mode more appropriate to philosophical inquiry than to "the struggle of an anguished conscience." He believes that "Christianity is not a doctrine . . . but an existential-communication."<sup>82</sup> For this reason Christianity has to be understood with reference to how it is communicated and appropriated; it is communication—God's communication with humanity. Preaching cannot simply apply dogmatics to particular cases, for communication is a theological problem in its own right. The art of preaching will be misconceived if it does not emerge from a theology of communication.

Kierkegaard's reflections on the communication of Christianity are thus developed in a dual contrast, to dogmatics on one side and classical rhetoric on the other. There is no assurance that the four topics we have explored above are what Kierkegaard had in mind when he spoke of the "entirely unique" categories of Christianity. They are simply examples of the kind of rhetorical criticism Kierkegaard thought Christianity requires, and his results should not be taken as normative. Kierkegaard was surely not interested in producing a prescriptive rhetoric, a set of do's and don'ts for preachers to follow. What is normative is the responsibility of every preacher to discover the rhetorical consequences of his or her own theology. It hardly needs to be added that the critique of classical rhetoric must be extended to contemporary rhetorics and theories of communication if they are to be of use to the preacher. The standards for such adaptations are not

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<sup>82</sup> JP I, #484.

effectiveness and good taste; it is not simply a matter of giving new forms to the old content. For the form itself requires a theological justification.



## Chapter V

## KIERKEGAARD'S RHETORICAL CATEGORIES

In the preceding chapters we have been concerned mainly with foundational or "metarhetorical" issues--with the anthropological, dialectical, and theological presuppositions upon which Kierkegaard based his rhetoric. There is some justification for this arrangement in the fact that Kierkegaard identified each of the three--anthropology, dialectic, and the "unique categories" of Christianity--as the determining factors in his theory of communication. In following this "genetic" approach a number of uniquely Kierkegaardian rhetorical categories have emerged which combine elements of each of the three perspectives. We will now need to examine these in their own right, and with special attention to their employment in the religious discourses. As Kierkegaard lists them in the "Dialectic of Ethical and Ethical-Religious Discourse" they are: double reflection, communication of capability, indirect communication, maieutic, and reduplication. Together they constitute the most important elements of Kierkegaard's special rhetorical vocabulary.

These categories are related to the foundational elements in much the same way as strategies are related to rules in a game: the rules define the context and parameters within which the game is played, while strategies for playing effectively are derived from this context. We should remember, however, that Kierkegaard's concept of the

rhetical "game" is not a competitive one. These are not strategies for conquering an audience, but for helping them to conquer themselves.

#### DOUBLE REFLECTION

Kierkegaard remarked that it is rare to find anyone who can use indirect communication even tolerably well. It demands a combination of imagination, empathy, and dialectical reasoning. Not only is it necessary to understand the object of communication, but also its relation to your own existence; then a means of expression must be found that "presents the truth in its truest form"; finally you need "eyes in the back of your head" to see how the listener will appropriate it. The task of juggling all these concerns Kierkegaard calls "double reflection." The term does not occur frequently (I find it only in the Postscript and a few journal entries), but it is important as a principle of composition. A look at the four main aspects of double reflection will also give us a quick overview of the concepts we will examine in the remainder of this chapter.

1. The form a speaker gives to the communication "should embody artistically as much of reflection as he himself has when existing in his thought."<sup>1</sup> In our discussion of the existential dialectic we noted a second stage of reflection, when a person seeks to express his or her thought in existence and action. Since speaking is a form of action, this double reflection applies to the speech as well. Authentic speech

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<sup>1</sup> CUP, p. 68.

is a refraction from the speaker's existence, and the same words will have a different resonance when spoken by a different person. This influence of the speaker's character (at least as it is perceived by the audience) on the speech was counted among the forms of rhetorical proof in classical rhetoric--ethical proof. For Kierkegaard, the key term is "reduplication"; the speaker's reduplication of the message in his or her existence affects the audience's interpretation of the message. This is preeminently the case with religious discourse, which cannot escape subjectivity and inwardness without falsifying itself. Thus if the preacher is to be aware of the meaning the sermon may have for the listener, he or she has no choice but to reflect doubly on the message and on his or her own existential relation to it.

2. This reflection must be embodied "in an artistic manner, please note."<sup>2</sup> By art Kierkegaard does not mean rhetorical eloquence in the classical sense of ornamentation, dressing up the communication in figures of speech pleasing to the ear. As we have noted, he sees any striving after the aesthetically pleasing as a deadly distraction in religious discourse. But neither is preaching simple self-expression, the outpouring of one impassioned soul to another. The art consists in presenting the message along with the speaker's inward appropriation, yet in such a way that it can be detached from the speaker and made available for the listener to recapture. The forms of literary art in the sermon are not to be a sideshow but the principal means of embodying

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<sup>2</sup> CUP, pp. 68-69.

the message itself. And since self-reflection is always a part of religious communication the artistic form will require self-reflection of the listener in order to reconstruct the meaning of the speech. As we will argue below, the need for reconstruction is the key element in Kierkegaard's strategies of indirect communication, in irony, metaphor, parable and story.

3. "The secret of all communication consists precisely in emancipating the recipient."<sup>3</sup> This third aspect of double reflection concerns the implied relation between speaker and listener in the communication. If the aim of the sermon is the listener's own appropriation, the speaker must guard his or her secondary role in the communication; "the personalities must be held devoutly apart."<sup>4</sup> There must be careful constraints on the speaker's personal influence in order to leave room for the listener's own struggle. The most common danger for a preacher is not that the congregation will reject the sermon, but that with "an excess of amiable stupidity"<sup>5</sup> they will come to an easy agreement and bypass the strain of appropriation. A preacher needs to employ counter-persuasive techniques to keep the listener at a distance; while the audience naturally leans toward consensus, the preacher must adopt a form that emphasizes individuality and diversity. For Kierkegaard, this is the first requirement for indirect communication.

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<sup>3</sup> CUP, p. 69.

<sup>4</sup> CUP, p. 73.

<sup>5</sup> CUP, p. 72.

4. There must be "an awareness of the form of the communication in relation to the recipient's possible misunderstanding."<sup>6</sup> Indirect communication always risks misunderstanding. Whenever the listener is left free to reconstruct the message, there is the possibility that it will be distorted in the process. In addition, the presumption of sin implies that we are actively engaged in distortion. One of the means available to the speaker to compensate for misunderstanding is dialectical clarity. By thinking through all the implications of the communication, the speaker will not be surprised by an unintended conclusion which an attentive listener correctly drew from the speech itself. Many a sermon has been derailed by an illustration that implied something quite different from what the preacher intended. But consistency alone will not prevent misunderstanding, unless the listeners are equally consistent. In addition, the speaker must enter into the listener's illusions and deceits by a double reflection, reflecting both on the message and its possible distortions. Kierkegaard borrows the Socratic term "maieutic" for this dialectical/psychological task.

Each of these points will be treated separately below, but here we would emphasize the need to co-ordinate them in actual composition. The elements of double reflection do not constitute four easy steps in sermon construction; composition is an organic process not easily broken down into discrete units. The maieutic service of delivering people

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<sup>6</sup> CUP, p. 70.

from their illusions will lead to a still birth if they are not "emancipated" for the truth in the process; for losing your illusions is not the same thing as discovering the truth. Conversely, the literary arts of indirection must be carefully checked and corrected for possible misunderstandings in reconstruction--Kierkegaard often writes one parable to guide the interpretation of another. And, to keep the art from running away with the artist, the speaker must be constantly relating it to his or her own existence. As Kierkegaard often remarked, if no one else was edified by his discourses, he was. First and last, a preacher must be subject to his or her own sermons.

#### THE COMMUNICATION OF CAPABILITY

Ethical-religious communication aims at a cultivation of the personality, at "character development" as we used to call it. That slightly arcane phrase rightly combines a notion of psychological maturity with an ability to reflect on and enact certain personal virtues. Kierkegaard calls an effort to elicit these qualities the communication of capability. His favorite example is drawn from military training: the farm boy is a soldier in potentia, and although military regulations have to be pounded into him, the main task is to cultivate the virtues of obedience, loyalty, and courage—which have to be "pounded out" of him.<sup>7</sup> Communication of capability can also be compared to training in an art. No amount of information about art will

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<sup>7</sup> JP I, #649, p. 269.

make you an artist; you have to learn by doing and reflecting on the results. Kierkegaard holds that a person learns to be a Christian in the same way, and the preacher is then not an artist so much as a teacher of the art.

How then does a sermon communicate the capability of being a Christian? There are four principles that summarize Kierkegaard's approach to the problem.

1. The element of knowledge to be presented must be functional. A sermon that is simply informative confuses the listener who wishes to apply it to his or her life; it may even create the illusion that Christianity consists of a special body of knowledge. Especially when a preacher is among the best-educated members of the community, there is a strong temptation for the teaching role to dominate in the pulpit. Kierkegaard noted that this tendency is reinforced by the kind of education a pastor receives; once the standards were "of a disciplinary nature: learning to be obedient, practicing renunciation and self-denial, the ascetic life, etc.," but then, "When Christianity became nothing but doctrine, the test became a scholarly examination--existence was never asked about at all."<sup>8</sup> The scholarly and doctrinal standards for ordination quite naturally became the standards by which the clergy preached. But as we saw in Kierkegaard's dialectic, he felt that the primary function of the scholarly and intellectual aspects of Christianity is to define the uncertainties that

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<sup>8</sup> JP III, #3018.

faith confronts. This element of knowledge is finally like Moses, who is indispensable in leading the way, but cannot himself cross over into the promised land.

Not knowledge but "capability" and action lead to belief:

The Christian Thesis is not: intelligere ut credam, nor is it credere ut intelligam.

No, it is: Act according to the command and orders of Christ; do the will of the Father--and you will become a believing person.

Christianity in no way lies in the sphere of intellectuality.<sup>9</sup>

In keeping with this thesis, whatever knowledge is communicated in a sermon must not remain in the "sphere" of intellectuality--and whether it is couched in technical language or presented so simply that a child could understand it is beside the point if it does not contribute to taking decisive Christian action.<sup>10</sup> If pastors want to share their knowledge or debate the intellectual issues of the day, they should find another occasion than the sermon. In a Christian sermon, theology must become logistics.

Kierkegaard's discourses are consistent with this thesis; not one could properly be called doctrinal. Theological categories are consistently directed toward a point of contact with the listeners'

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<sup>9</sup> JP III, #3023. The Latin is: "I understand in order that I may believe," and "I believe in order that I may understand."

<sup>10</sup> Kierkegaard writes: "It is just another blind pretext which has been invented--namely, this conflict about preaching grandiloquently or simply, that is, about using more pretentious words which only a few can understand or more simple ones. No, simplicity is to do what one says; to act is to make simple . . . On the other hand, to use the most simple words--and then not to do what one says . . . this also is grandiloquence." JP I, #665.



spiritual development. This is, in effect, Kierkegaard's main theological enterprise: translating doctrine into the sphere of personal existence. His measure for whether theology is performing its function is if it provides the element of understanding preliminary to Christian praxis, "and then no further."<sup>11</sup> To go farther theologically than the listener's existence is to miss the mark.

Here a little caution is needed in approaching Kierkegaard. He often repeats the sentiment that the "simple man" need only confess and humble himself before the Christian ideals, and God will help him to understand, while intellectuals bog down in theological problems of their own making. It is difficult to judge whether he underestimated the conceptual needs of Copenhagen shopkeepers, but his position (at least on the face of it) seems a bit simplistic for a contemporary congregation. Too many preachers have relieved their congregations of the responsibility of thinking by preaching "just the simple Gospel." Yet this is surely not Kierkegaard's intention. We may in fact suspect him of a little polemical deception, for his emphasis on the simple over against the wise is itself set in the context of a highly complex conceptual apparatus. For all his apparent reverence for the simple believer, the problems that occupy him most are those of the intellectual.

But the main point about intellect and simplicity is not essentially a matter of intelligence. Kierkegaard's anthropology and

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. TC, pp. 71-72.

dialectic give him the basis for a translation of theological categories into terms that can be chosen and acted upon. This is what he means by simplicity—"to act is to make simple." Action helps people to sort out the imaginary problems from the real ones, and it gives them the experience they need to find meaning in the Christian theological categories.

The main pressure on a preacher with regard to knowledge is to provide answers to the questions that are troubling the congregation. If you manage to resist the temptation to show off your theological acumen and give straightforward and comprehensible answers, Kierkegaard suggests that you still may have confused the issue if you haven't related your knowledge to a concrete task or situation facing the congregation. They will be distracted by the new information they are given to absorb and they will be deprived of the education that comes from action. Preachers have a burden of responsibility for how they employ their theological expertise rhetorically. We can use our knowledge to make our congregations dependent on us for answers, or we can use it to help them find their own.

2. The sermon that communicates capability must emphasize the listener's freedom; "Freedom means to be capable."<sup>12</sup> Respecting the listener's freedom does not mean refraining from making demands. If freedom means to be able, then it also means to be responsible, and Kierkegaard emphasizes freedom itself as an ethical demand. As an

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<sup>12</sup> JP II, #1249.

aspect of the locus of equality the speaker presumes every listener to be capable of enacting the message: "If the learner says: I can't, the teacher answers: Nonsense, do it as well as you can. With that the instruction begins."<sup>13</sup>

Freedom does not simply appear on demand, however. Kierkegaard often asserts that an arbitrarily free will is a phantom; actual freedom only appears in a situation of choice, when a person is faced with a concrete either/or. In this sense freedom really is something of a phantom, in that it is there when we use it and gone when we do not. From another perspective, however, freedom has or may have a continuity, in that it is an aspect of character. In choosing we actualize our freedom, but only as our self-understanding is reflected in the choice. While every listener to a discourse may be presumed to be free, each one's freedom is shaped and limited by his or her personal history. Thus if communication of capability is to be a cultivation of freedom, it must also be a cultivation of the personality.

On these assumptions, Kierkegaard's rhetorical approach to activating a listener's freedom is to define a situation and link the possibilities for responding to it to the listener's character. This link to character rarely permits calling for a single specific decision, for each listener has a different history of freedom, and each person's decision is therefore inwardly unique even if it is outwardly the same as the others'. Instead, Kierkegaard often interprets the whole subject

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<sup>13</sup> JP I, #653.

of a discourse in terms of its relation to the will and to the formation of the personality. The five discourses that comprise Part One of Works of Love all treat love as an aspect of will: love is a "task," "You shall love," our duty is to love those we see, "Love is a matter of conscience." Again, Kierkegaard links the capacity to love with the capacity to choose, and this in turn is the source of continuity in both love and the personality: "you ought to preserve the love and you ought to preserve yourself and in and by preserving yourself to preserve the love."<sup>14</sup> In The Gospel of Suffering he develops the contrast between the wish to avoid suffering and the will to learn and profit from it (much as he had earlier contrasted wish and expectation in the Edifying Discourses). We scarcely need to add Purity of Heart, the whole subject of which is the will.

In each of these examples there is rarely a direct appeal to the will, as if a person could simply decide to be pure of heart without further ado; Kierkegaard is more concerned with cultivating the inward conditions of freedom. As he says in his opening prayer to Purity of Heart, "What neither a man's burning wish nor his determined resolution may attain to, may be granted unto him in the sorrowing of repentance: to will only one thing."<sup>15</sup> Even when freedom is bound in sin and cannot love God in purity of heart, Kierkegaard assumes there is yet one thing that can be done, and that is to sorrow and repent. The communication

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<sup>14</sup> WL, p. 57.

<sup>15</sup> PH, p. 32.

of capability requires that the speaker find the point at which freedom can be active and start from there.

3. To communicate capability is to communicate a process and not a result. Kierkegaard once complained of the sterility of some preaching that it was like reading out of a cookbook to a hungry man. The image can be reversed to illustrate a different point: the business of the preacher is not to be serving up pre-cooked meals but teaching people how to cook their own.

Kierkegaard consistently maintains that certainty of the ethical-religious comes from an inward resolution which has no necessary connection with rational proofs or the results of theological scholarship. In one of the Christian Discourses he tells of a theologian who had written a famous work on the doctrine of God. The man comes to a point of crisis in his faith and goes anonymously to seek counsel from a pastor:

He opens his mind to him and seeks comfort. The clergyman, who is abreast of the times and is a thinker of sorts, would now prove to him that this also must be for the best and work for his good, since God is love; but he soon ascertains that he is not the man to maintain his side in a conflict of thought with this unknown individual. After several vain attempts, the clergyman says; "Well I have only one counsel left to give you; there is a book about the love of God by so and so, read it, study it, if that does not help you, no man can help you." The unknown man replies, "I myself am the author of this book."<sup>16</sup>

If the author himself is not convinced, one can see the dubious value of such arguments. For if a layperson finds certainty in reading such a book while the author does not, it is likely that the layperson is

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<sup>16</sup> ChD, pp. 206-207.

ignorant of the difficulties—or that certainty comes in a different way, a way that is only accidentally related to the book.

Under such conditions the task of the sermon cannot be to prove God or Christianity for the listener, "For the proofs remain equivocal; they are the pro et contra of the reasoning intellect, and therefore can be used contra et pro."<sup>17</sup> As we saw in Chapter 3, the appropriate form of proof in this situation is indirect, and the dialectical concept of indirect proof then requires a rhetorical expression in indirect communication. The sermon must induce the listeners to make their own trials, to find their own inner certainty. The pastor's certainty cannot be transferred to the listeners directly or there is a deception: they are certain, not of God but of the pastor.

For this reason, Kierkegaard says that religious address should have "as few results as possible."<sup>18</sup> The sermon has no right to draw conclusions on behalf of the listener, and it must not give the illusion of doing so. Kierkegaard's conclusion to the discourse cited above is a direct expression of this point:

O my hearer, thou who perhaps art accustomed to require everything of the speaker, here thou canst see that it all lies in the hearer . . . [T]hou wouldst require of him the impossible, if thou wert to require that he produce a definite effect: either to tranquillize, or to terrify. For what effect this true discourse will produce depends solely upon who the hearer is . . . It is not the discourse which has terrified the one, and it is not the discourse which has tranquillized the other; it is the one and the other who in this discourse have understood themselves.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> TC, p. 98.

<sup>18</sup> JP I, #630.

<sup>19</sup> ChD, p. 209.

Kierkegaard's approach in this discourse, as in many others, is to turn what appears to be a conclusion into a process, a task for the listener. He dramatizes this change in the conclusion of his story of the doubting theologian:

The course of his thought became inverted, his thought-process became different. He did not say: God is love, ergo all things work together for a man's good; but he said: "If I believe that God is love, then all things work together for my good."<sup>20</sup>

Kierkegaard does the same for his readers. He refuses to argue whether the assertion is true, but tells them to see that they love God, and then they'll find out.

Engaging the listeners in a religious struggle is only the first step, however. The sermon also needs to give appropriate guidance. It does little good to call for repentance, for example, if people have no idea of the kind of inward struggle it involves; they will only simulate what they take to be the correct religious attitude. Therefore Kierkegaard structures Purity of Heart as a devotional manual on repentance, offering a detailed account of the "barriers" and the "price," and giving instructions on "What then must I do?" The book concludes with a word-for-word repetition of the opening prayer, which gives it a circular form, leaving the reader where he or she began in preparation for the office of confession. If there are any results they do not lie in the book but in whatever confession each reader makes. The discourses waste no words in calling for a confession; they are designed to teach us how to do it. In a similar manner, the first

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<sup>20</sup> ChD, p. 207.

discourse in For Self-Examination offers instruction in the devotional reading of scripture: "How to derive true benediction from beholding oneself in the mirror of the Word." The final aim of his text (James 1:22 ff.) is to "be ye doers of the Word, and not hearers only," but Kierkegaard first wants to be sure that we can hear it.

The reader of Kierkegaard's discourses may be struck by the fact that they often don't seem to go anywhere. It is not unusual to wade through twenty or thirty pages and feel that you have come up empty-handed. Some of the fault may indeed be Kierkegaard's, but the idea of communicating a capability or instruction in an art offers another explanation. Results are immediately satisfying; a painting, a song, or a depiction of the "exploits of faith" and the glory of Christ have a moving effect if only the audience pays attention. But sketches, scales, and spiritual exercises have meaning only for those who practice them; they are processes, and one who communicates a process risks boring all those who wish to remain spectators.<sup>21</sup>

4. "The rule for the communication of capability is: begin immediately to do it."<sup>22</sup> And the corresponding rule for the preacher is: always give the listener something to do. "Nothing is more dangerous than to have all these high feelings and exalted resolutions go off in the direction of merely eloquent speaking."<sup>23</sup> Religious capability is not simply a matter of experiencing certain emotional

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. JP III, #3506.

<sup>22</sup> JP I, #653, p. 284.

<sup>23</sup> JP III, #3506.



states or developing correct attitudes, but that is just the impression made by a sermon that omits a call for personal action. Kierkegaard constantly reiterates the same basic point, that "in order to achieve its proper emphasis the talk must unequivocally demand something of the listener."<sup>24</sup> His strongest demands came with Training in Christianity, where "the requirement for being a Christian is strained by the pseudonym to the highest pitch of ideality."<sup>25</sup> This brief excerpt conveys the dominant hortatory tone:

Look once again upon Him, the humbled One! For surely it is this, the humiliation, that ought to be preached--no guidance is needed for sharing His Glory with Him or for instruction how to behave in that instance. The humiliation is what must be preached, the fact that if thou wilt not share with Him His humiliation, neither will He share with thee His glory, and hence that thou must share His humiliation with Him. Look upon Him, the humbled One! And if this sight affects thee deeply, so that thou art ready for any suffering along with Him--then, yes, then I say, "Thou shalt suffer with Him."<sup>26</sup>

The prose is repetitious, as befits instruction, where to elaborate distracts from the clarity of the task. Kierkegaard speaks like a swimming instructor; "Stroke! . . . Stroke! . . . Stroke!" "Humiliation! . . . Humiliation! . . . Humiliation!" Furthermore, the instruction is not to be humble, which can simply be an inner attitude requiring no outward expression, but to take the Christian action which draws a humiliating response upon oneself. Kierkegaard did not expect many to accept the demand, but he did expect them to accept the only

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<sup>24</sup> PH, p. 178.

<sup>25</sup> TC, p. 7.

<sup>26</sup> TC, p. 173.

other alternative—to make an admission that they were not willing to follow Christ.

Not all of Kierkegaard's demands were this "extreme." More often he urges the listeners to make an experiment, to take the theme of the discourse and test it in their daily lives,<sup>27</sup> and he provides plenty of examples of this testing to get the listener started. It is like giving homework assignments which are both a development of the learner's capabilities and preparation for further instruction. If such a program were carried out by a preacher from week to week, the preaching could build on itself instead of starting from scratch every week with the presumption that nothing has happened in the interim. Leaving the listener with a task is a clear way of extending the influence of the sermon beyond the Sunday morning hour. Furthermore, it places a healthy burden on the preacher to discover the active consequences of the text, and to see that his or her preaching from week to week expresses a consistent program of "upbuilding."

Communication of capability also means to begin immediately. Kierkegaard maintained careful control over the sense of time in his discourses. They emphasize the present tense. When past or future come into view they are presented as elements of a present concern, as remembrance and hope. Likewise "contemporaneity" is a key hermeneutical concept—to experience the past of the text as a present reality. Decision and action are necessarily in the present, and if the sermon is

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. WL, p. 44; JFY, pp. 162-174.

to help the listener to "begin" it must emphasize the moment. Consequently a good deal of Kierkegaard's treatment of time in the discourses is aimed at calling the listener out of an indefinite past or future (or an even more befuddling mixture of the two) into a situation of being "contemporary with oneself."<sup>28</sup> Of course past and future can still be used to clarify the present, but without the orientation to present action they become nostalgia and fantasy.

A simple focus on current events does not assure contemporaneity either. When a minister talks about the news in the morning papers, but in such a way that the listener gets no suggestion as to what to do about it, the time is the present but there may be no sense of presence. To establish an impression of immediacy there must be both time and place. The locality or scene of the sermon therefore requires the same careful handling as the sense of time. Kierkegaard identified a common homiletical error with the lack of a relevant scene:

Once in a while a parson causes a little hubbub from the pulpit, about there being something wrong somewhere with all these numerous Christians—but all those to whom he is speaking are Christians, and those he speaks about are not present. This is more appropriately described as a feigned emotion.<sup>29</sup>

Whenever a disjunction is established between the listeners and the subject of the discourse we may suspect that the audience has been mislocated. It is small consolation to go away with the feeling that it was a good sermon—for somebody else.

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<sup>28</sup> ChD, p. 77.

<sup>29</sup> PV, pp. 23-24.

The scene of the sermon need not be limited to the physical location of the listener, however, but may range anywhere within the listener's inward geography. The relevant scene will vary with the subject and conditions of the communication, from a private room to the sanctuary, to one's town or nation; it may be imagined or actual, but it must be definite and it must maintain a clear connection with the listener's sphere of activity, for we can only act in a specific time and place. Kierkegaard varies his scenes from a field of lilies to the streets of Copenhagen, but his discourses always return home to the situation of the reader. If only by the frequent appellation "My reader" he recalls you to the fact that you are sitting in a chair somewhere with his book in your hands. The discourses may gain wider significance by a variety of scenes, but in the end, if a "capability" is to be communicated, the time is always "now" and the place is always "here."

#### INDIRECT COMMUNICATION

What Kierkegaard means by indirect communication is not always easy to understand. To identify the pseudonymous works as indirect and the edifying and Christian discourses as direct is too simple a solution, for there is already an element of indirection when the discourses are linked to the pseudonyms as accompanying or interpreting them. As Kierkegaard says in the Point of View, the "duplicity" is not merely in the use of pseudonyms, but in the contrast between the pseudonymous and religious work; the

"confrontation of witnesses."<sup>30</sup> There is a further indirection in that the discourses (with the exception of Training in Christianity) did not express Kierkegaard's full understanding of Christianity, but only so much as he felt he had personally appropriated at the time of writing. More important, however, is that Kierkegaard sees that all communication of the existential, of subjectivity, inwardness and capability, must be in some sense indirect.

The religious discourses are a mixed mode of communication, "direct-indirect." In the foregoing chapters we have seen how elements of Kierkegaard's anthropology, existential dialectic, and theology all contribute to the notion of indirect communication, so that it is better understood as a family of concepts and their related rhetorical strategies than as a single well-defined principle. We now need to look more closely at the technical or strategic side of indirect communication; e.g., how does Kierkegaard do it? The two main rhetorical problems in indirection are the establishment of the appropriate relationship between speaker and listener, and the verbal structure of indirect communications.

In the Postscript Kierkegaard writes, "The entire essential content of subjective thought is essentially secret, because it cannot be directly communicated."<sup>31</sup> He did not view human beings as monads, deaf, dumb, and blind to one another. After all, he spent most of his life sharing his inwardness (however elliptically) in his authorship.

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<sup>30</sup> PV, pp. 11-13.

<sup>31</sup> CUP, p. 73.

But he did not want to lose sight of the degree to which people remain mysteries to one another despite their best efforts to communicate. For Kierkegaard, it is the nature of existence as inwardness that it can be shared only as refracted in language, art and action. Even in intimate personal relationships there remains that mystery behind and beyond communication.

The problem is compounded by the context of preaching. The preacher has to address a message of urgent concern to each person, yet he or she is facing a crowd. It only helps a little to call that crowd "the Christian community." Despite the common agreements and allegiances that allegedly brought them together, most congregations are still bewilderingly and sometimes painfully diverse groups of people. The better a pastor knows the congregation, the more he or she will be aware of the complexity of the task.

The difficulty appears, then, in two ways: in the mystery of the individual and the diversity of the group. The problem posed by diversity is especially apparent when a preacher tries to state generalizations valid for the whole group and appropriate to the task of preaching. Faced with the usual overflow crowd one Easter morning, a preacher I know triumphantly proclaimed, "We all believe in the Resurrection . . . or something like it!" There are many problems with this statement, but one of them is surely this presumptuous "all." What effect could it have on people who perhaps had some inner doubts that morning—except to make them feel like spies and traitors among the crowd of believers? Better to acknowledge the difficulties

that face every thoughtful person and then to ask, "Do you believe?" This is the point Kierkegaard makes in his discourse on "He was believed on in the world."<sup>32</sup>

Perhaps our preacher was trying to account for the diversity by appending "or something like it." But this is false in another way: there is nothing like it. The diversity and the individuality of the listeners in relation to the Resurrection is in their own inward appropriation of that unique event, not in a variety of substitutes for it. One does not honor the listener's individuality by offering a theological smorgasbord, but by taking a clear position on the Gospel and then—"Judge for yourselves!" The preacher who seeks to address the mystery and diversity of the congregation by offering a false consensus or a choice of theological options soon falls into incoherence.

Kierkegaard sought another solution. His goal was to speak intimately with the individual, but he knew it could be done only with great care. Too direct, and one either puts the listener on the defensive, if the speech is on target, or misses the mark entirely. Too general and the sermon fails in application. The tensions of this effort are indicated in two contrasting journal entries of 1845:

A religious discourse should never be abstract truth, for all understand it and yet understand nothing. The task . . . is to deal with this thing and that, with this one and that one, Peter and Paul, potters and merchants and chamberlains--aber in order to lead it all (in concreto) to the absolute. Of course it does not name people by name and says Mads Sorensen from East

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<sup>32</sup> ChD, pp. 239ff.

Sundby, it is you I am talking about, but it recognizes the relativities and manifold concretions of existence so precisely that it nevertheless does talk specifically about this one and that one.<sup>33</sup>

It is certainly remarkable that the abstract expression in a rhetorical presentation is sometimes more effective than concrete description. For example, if a pastor were to say, "I do not know your life, my listener, I do not know what lies most heavily on your mind, what your secret sorrow is," he would very likely draw tears from one who would sit unmoved if the pastor actually described his particularized sorrow . . . [The abstract] has something engaging about it, a breeze, as it were, from the universal which passes over the listener's head and stirs him precisely because he is not being talked about in particular.<sup>34</sup>

Kierkegaard's observations may shed some light on two common experiences for many pastors. Certainly one problem with speaking to a congregation is that there is always someone else to whom the message can be referred. Mr. Smith applies the message to Mrs. Jones, who in turn is quite sure the pastor had Mr. Johnson dead to rights—with the result that no one applies it to themselves. Yet most pastors also know this experience, of parishioners who remark after a sermon, "I felt as if you were talking directly to me." (One might reply, "Of course I was talking to you. Who else would I be talking to?") Often the pastor is just as surprised as the listener, which is only a further confirmation of the inward mystery of every person, which the sermon must acknowledge but can never control.

In the case of congregational buck-passing we can always blame the craftiness of our listeners. But there may also be a rhetorical fallacy that contributes to the problem. To borrow a phrase from

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<sup>33</sup> JP III, #3470.

<sup>34</sup> JP I, #629.



Whitehead, we might call it the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. In the first entry cited above Kierkegaard sensibly recommends the concrete over the abstract, but we need to be careful about what concreteness means here. In keeping with their homiletical training, many preachers think they are being concrete when they speak in pictorial images, refer to sensory objects, colorful characters, and specific events. They are not entirely wrong, but this notion by itself lacks the essential feature of concreteness in ethical-religious discourse: an immediate relation to the existential concern of the listener. If we think of the concrete in communication as that which presents the subject most vividly, giving it definition, conveying a sense of reality and immediacy, then concreteness in ethical-religious communication is not achieved by images of physical reality. It must embody passionate concern, reflection, and decision, for these are the realities of an inward struggle. Without these elements neither the most vivid descriptions of someone else's troubles nor accosting Mads Sorensen from the pulpit will bring a proper challenge to the individual. All may understand it yet understand nothing about themselves.

Kierkegaard's second entry likewise suggests another viewpoint on the "abstract." He uses the term here in an artistic sense: abstraction as expressing the universal and the essential by paring away the particular and the accidental. Kierkegaard was attracted to the stock figures of medieval ballads and morality plays for this reason. By presenting an Everyman they engaged the imagination of the individual, so that "Strangely enough, while it seems to transcend the

individual, it commends itself most to the people who have individuality."<sup>35</sup> The key feature of such abstraction is that it leaves a vacancy in the communication, a place the listener can occupy and fill with his or her own particular concerns. Understood in this way, abstraction is a complement to concreteness. The pastor who speaks about "your secret sorrow," and lets that sorrow remain secret is concrete enough to engage the listener, yet abstract enough to leave the listener free for his or her own response.

Much of the rhetorical power in Kierkegaard's indirect communication is generated by this compression and expansion in the interplay of concrete and abstract expression: a narrowing in on a specific crisis and a simultaneous opening out toward the listener's own appropriation.

The success of this technique depends upon maintaining a careful control over the implied relation of speaker and listener in the communication. The listener cannot be allowed to substitute the personality and opinions of the speaker in the vacancy left for his or her response. As Kierkegaard put it in the Postscript, "the personalities must be held devoutly apart."<sup>36</sup> Therefore he approaches the listener with great circumspection. Occasionally he declines to ask a simple rhetorical question without first handing the initiative over to the listener: "The talk asks you, then, or you ask yourself by means

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<sup>35</sup> JP II, #1978.

<sup>36</sup> CUP, p. 73.

of the talk . . ."<sup>37</sup> (He is doubly insulated—"the talk" is already dissociated from the speaker.) Or he approaches the listener by a hypothetical statement: "If a man's troubled mind felt itself ensnared like a prisoner in this difficulty, he would doubtless . . ."<sup>38</sup> Or he uses parables and figures: "As the pagan philosopher, out of respect for the object of his speech, veiled his face, so out of respect for the concerned, I shall willingly veil my face, so that I see no one, but speak only of the birds of the air."<sup>39</sup>

These techniques are a little like turning your back while someone is getting dressed: both parties are intensely aware of one another, but there is no direct contact. The situation is entirely different if one simply happens to be looking in a different direction. Averting the speech, like averting your eyes, relates to the individual precisely by leaving him or her alone at the appropriate time.

This constant concern for the independence of the listener from the speaker provides the necessary context for indirect communication, but it is only the context, not the communication itself. We now need to examine the more difficult aspect of Kierkegaard's theory: the appropriate form or structure of the communication. Kierkegaard provided plenty of negative examples, which are clear enough—a man who gained a large following by teaching that a person should have no followers;<sup>40</sup> another who, convinced that the God-relationship of the

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<sup>37</sup> PH, p. 182.

<sup>38</sup> ED I, p. 9.

<sup>39</sup> GS, p. 195.

<sup>40</sup> CUP, p. 70.

individual is a secret, went about whispering the secret to others<sup>41</sup>--all are variations on the problem of form contradicting content.

It is a little more difficult to discover what the appropriate form for such messages might be. Kierkegaard gave numerous descriptions of the structure of indirect communication, but one of the most suggestive is this, from Training in Christianity:

This art consists in reducing oneself, the communicator, to nobody, something purely objective, and then incessantly composing qualitative opposites into unity . . . An example of such indirect communication is, so to compose jest and earnest that the composition is a dialectical knot--and with this to be nobody. If anyone is to profit by this sort of communication he must himself undo the knot for himself.<sup>42</sup>

The primary example of such a knot is irony. A statement that suggests the possibility of an ironic interpretation (only a possibility, for if we identify it as ironic we have already begun to interpret it) can be construed in one of two or more ways, and one interpretation normally excludes the other. Ordinarily we interpret irony by a guess as to the speaker's intentions, but if the speaker gives no clues (becomes "nobody"), then our interpretation is strictly our own choice about how we view the issue at hand. We reveal ourselves in the interpretation. Humor, ambiguity, allusion, metaphor and parable all share with irony the need for a reconstruction of meaning by the listener or reader--a semantic version of the existential appropriation Kierkegaard sought to

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<sup>41</sup> CUP, p. 72.

<sup>42</sup> TC, pp. 132-133.

elicit. A closer look at Kierkegaard's use of irony may therefore provide some clues to his other verbal strategies of indirection as well.

In A Rhetoric of Irony Wayne C. Booth offers a rhetorical classification of irony that will be useful in understanding Kierkegaard. Booth classifies irony according to three related scales.<sup>43</sup> The fundamental distinction is between stable and unstable irony; stable irony conceals an affirmation, while unstable irony simply undermines the meaning of an assertion without leaving enough evidence to reconstruct an alternative meaning. "We are all Christians--of a sort" ranks high on the scale of stability. A reader can reconstruct Kierkegaard's meaning with some confidence, as something like, "No, we are not all Christians, no matter what we pretend; to be a Christian of the sort we are in Denmark is not to be a Christian at all."

In contrast, we can choose almost any of the "Diapsalmata" as examples of instability:

Old age realizes the dreams of youth: look at Dean Swift; in his youth he built an asylum for the insane, in his old age he was himself an inmate.<sup>44</sup>

If you marry, you will regret it; if you do not marry, you will also regret it . . . Hang yourself, you will regret it; do not hang yourself, and you will also regret that . . .<sup>45</sup>

In both examples, the meaning of the first part is undercut by the second--the rug is pulled out, but there is no floor underneath. The

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<sup>43</sup> Wayne C. Booth, A Rhetoric of Irony (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), pp. 234-235.

<sup>44</sup> E/O I, 21.

<sup>45</sup> E/O I, 37.

only possible affirmation here is the affirmation of irony itself. Stability or instability can be altered, however, by the larger context in which the irony is placed: in Either/Or A's ironies are stabilized by the perspective of Judge Wilhelm, where it becomes clear that they are a function of his own personal entrapment—but then the Judge himself is ironized by the final sermon.

The second scale is the "degree of openness or disguise."<sup>46</sup> How do you know the author intends irony? Kierkegaard's references to Regina in the published works were often ironic, but they were always covert; his most explicit statement is the dedication of "Two Discourses at the Communion on Friday": "To one unnamed, whose name will some day be named." The degree of disclosure is largely a strategic choice. Our enjoyment of irony is enhanced by how hard we have to work to grasp it, but if the irony is too well concealed much of the audience is likely to miss it altogether. A literary dictionary claims that "The ability to recognize irony is one of the surest tests of intelligence and sophistication."<sup>47</sup> Kierkegaard is interested in neither quality in his use of irony; he wants to test inwardness. Thus, although he identifies Purity of Heart in his journals as ironic,<sup>48</sup> the reader of those discourses will find comparatively little verbal evidence of irony. The overarching ironic perspective only appears to one who has passed through the ethical struggle for a good will and found it in repentance.

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<sup>46</sup> Booth, p. 234.

<sup>47</sup> William Flint Thrall and Addison Hibbard, A Handbook to Literature (New York: Odyssey Press, 1960), p. 248.

<sup>48</sup> JP V, #5975.

(Of course, one can take a shortcut by reading the journals.) If Kierkegaard's strategy works, only the reader who adopts the viewpoint of repentance will be able to piece together the scattered verbal clues and understand the master irony of the ethical stage. At their best, reconstructing Kierkegaard's ironies depends less on intellect than on inwardness.

When Kierkegaard wants to make a point by overt stable irony, the clues are easily found:

Alas, it is as if the human to his own humiliation has made the discovery of which he is so proud: when he learned how to grind glass cleverly, so it enlarged the object, then he discovered by the help of the magnifying glass that even the finest human accomplishment is coarse and imperfect. But the discovery which humiliated the human, honored God, for no one has ever discovered by the aid of a magnifying glass that the lily became less beautiful, less skillfully devised. On the contrary, it showed it to be more and more beautiful, more and more ingenious.<sup>49</sup>

"Alas" is so clear an indicator that Kierkegaard could just as well have begun, "Isn't it ironic that . . ." Taken by itself, the first sentence is overt irony, but its stability is not established until the next sentence. The irony that human accomplishments reveal human imperfections is stabilized by the affirmation of God's perfection. Yet when these two perspectives are combined, another, covert irony is suggested: this imperfect human is, like the lily, a creation of the perfect God. This is the larger irony on which the discourse ("Contentment with Our Common Humanity") turns. In this way overt irony

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<sup>49</sup> CS, p. 175.

can be used to establish covert irony. If one then learns to be like the lily, this final irony dissolves into humor.

The third of Booth's scales measures the scope of the assertion or undermining made by the irony, "ranging from local to grand-but-still-finite to 'absolute infinite negativity.'"<sup>50</sup> Kierkegaard's situation as a "genius in a market town" is strictly local; the scarcity of Christians in Christendom is far more general, but he pulls back from the assertion that there are no Christians anywhere. At the far end of the scale, an infinite unstable irony, is A's story of the laughter of the gods:

I was caught up into the seventh heaven. There sat all the gods in assembly. By special grace I was granted the privilege of making a wish. "Wilt thou," said Mercury, "have youth or beauty or power or a long life or the most beautiful maiden or any of the other glories we have in the chest? Choose, but only one thing." For a moment I was at a loss. Then I addressed myself to the gods as follows: "Most honorable contemporaries, I choose this one thing, that I may always have the laugh on my side." Not one of the gods said a word; on the contrary, they all began to laugh.<sup>51</sup>

Cosmic laughter is the far limit of irony. Are the gods laughing at A because he has made a foolish choice, or with A because he has grasped the fundamental irony of existence? His reference to Paul might suggest the latter interpretation. That the gods are addressed as "contemporaries" could suggest that A is living in "the Greek mode," or it may be an aside to Kierkegaard's contemporaries, who sit in judgment of him. There is really no way of knowing; A's story is an infinite instability.

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<sup>50</sup> Booth, p. 234.

<sup>51</sup> E/O I, 41-42.



With the aid of Booth's schema it is possible to get a clearer sense of the uses of irony in Kierkegaard's religious discourses. At the outset we can identify two limits. One is the type of stable overt local irony that amounts to a sarcastic attack on a particular individual. As the victim of such attacks in the Corsair, Kierkegaard was painfully aware of their misuse. Even if such irony is to the point, it has no place in religious discourse. Its victim is too localized to find wide application, and it encourages a sense of superiority in the audience, if only because they have escaped the attack. In the later discourses, when covert jabs at Mynster appear, they are not against him personally, but against his position as an exemplar of Danish Christianity.

The other limit on irony is infinite instability. In religious discourse the affirmation of God is a stability that resists all ironic underminings. If an unbelieving pastor tried to preach that unbelief, such a discourse could only succeed in ironizing the speaker. Kierkegaard shows the ludicrous effect of an infinite instability on preaching in a story from the Attack on Christendom:

It is related of a Swedish priest that, profoundly disturbed by the sight of the effect his address produced upon the auditors, who were dissolved in tears, he said soothingly, "Children, do not weep; the whole thing might be a lie."<sup>52</sup>

Infinite unstable irony is by its nature an undermining of a God-term, and whatever literary interest it holds (cf. Beckett, Sartre, or

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<sup>52</sup> AC, p. 181.

Vonnegut), or however well it interprets the "modern temper," its appearance in preaching amounts to a self-cancellation.

Within these bounds there is still a substantial place for irony in preaching, for irony seems to be an inevitable part of Christian experience. We speak of Christian fellowship but squabble over hymnals and pew cushions; we sit well-fed and well-dressed in an elegant sanctuary and listen to a gospel addressed to the hungry, the naked, and the homeless. The ideality of our Christian beliefs renders irony from the paltriness of our lives. Worst of all, from Kierkegaard's point of view, is that in the face of such obvious contradictions, nobody laughs.<sup>53</sup> People may perhaps be aware of the irony, but if they fail to smile or laugh at it, they have yet to conquer it; they are still living within the contradiction.

Thus the ironies of Christendom demand an ironic treatment in the sermon to point out contradictions and undermine complacency. Here the negative and critical functions of irony predominate; in its immediate context it is unstable (or dissociative, in dialectical terminology), aimed at breaking apart or loosening up the listeners' self-perceptions. And it is local enough to find specific application, but should also be general and covert enough to avoid sarcasm. Kierkegaard gives a sly account of this need for a tactful presentation of irony in his introduction to "The Anxieties of the Heathen." An honest look at Christendom leads to the conclusion that:

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<sup>53</sup> AC, p. 181.

"These anxieties are found amongst men in this land, ergo this Christian land is pagan." The discourse about the anxieties of the heathen will then sound like sly mockery. Yet we dare not permit ourselves to take such a severe view of Christendom, or to employ this almost cruel mockery, a mockery, be it observed, which would finally fall on the head of the speaker himself, who doubtless is not by any means such a perfect Christian. But let us not forget that the discourse might as it were have this mockery up its sleeve, that if an angel were to speak, he might thus make sport of us who call ourselves Christians, by giving this turn to his discourse, and instead of rebuking our mediocre Christianity, he might describe the heathen anxieties, adding immediately, "but in this land which is Christian there are to be found of course no such anxieties" . . .<sup>54</sup>

The presentation is itself ironic, for Kierkegaard did entertain such a "severe view," which he here smuggles in with the voice of an angel. The mitigating factor is that he includes himself as a victim of the attack. The angel's choice of irony over direct rebuke has the virtue of leaving the listeners to draw the damning conclusion for themselves. By the end of the passage, Kierkegaard has made his point, both directly and ironically, while giving the appearance of great restraint and deference to the audience.

This angelic irony hovers over the discourses on anxiety and lands with full force in "Thoughts which wound from behind." These discourses are as near to satire as edification allows: "the text is to be chosen in such a way that it appears to be a Gospel text, and is that also, but then comes the stinger."<sup>55</sup>

Critical or negative irony in Christian discourse is always local, situational; it "arises from the constant placing of the

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<sup>54</sup> ChD, pp. 15-16.

<sup>55</sup> JP V, #6096.

particularities of the finite together with the infinite ethical requirement, thus permitting the contradiction to come into being."<sup>56</sup> Such irony has the "earnestness" of seeking to describe the actual state of affairs and demanding that the audience take a position. It is not a matter of being wry or witty. To speak honestly of the ironies of Christendom it is necessary to use irony.

Beyond the irony of Christendom, there is irony in Christianity itself. The Christian life is a life of suffering, yet in this suffering is the greatest joy. It is a life of constant striving, yet before God we can do nothing. This essentially Christian form of irony is reflected in the titles of many of Kierkegaard's discourses:

The Edification Implied in the Thought that as Against God We are Always in the Wrong

Man's Need of God Constitutes His Highest Perfection

The Righteous Man Strives in Prayer with God and Conquers--in that God Conquers

The Joy of it--that Affliction does not Bereave of Hope, but Recruits Hope

The Joy of it--that Misfortune is Good Fortune

This irony is the converse of the type we discussed above. Instead of covert, unstable, and local, it is overt, stable, and if not "infinite," then at least a universal feature of the Christian life. In Kierkegaard's terms qualitative opposites are "composed into unity," and the task of understanding amounts to untying the knot. Like the irony of judgment, this irony of grace demands a reconstruction by reference

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<sup>56</sup> CUP, p. 448.

to the listener's existence. Being in the wrong before God could easily be terrifying rather than edifying; "misfortune is good fortune" could be masochism or Stoicism. Apprehending the message as gospel depends on finding the stable affirmation within the contradiction--just the opposite of the previous form which sought the contradiction in an affirmation.

Kierkegaard's rhetorical treatment of this Christian irony can be seen clearly in his introduction to "The Joy of it--that Misfortune is Good Fortune":

Misfortune is good fortune. "But this," I hear some one say, "is merely a jest, and easy enough to understand, for if only one will look at everything in an inverted way, there is some sense in it: directly understood, misfortune is misfortune; inversely, misfortune is good fortune. Such a thing is only jesting, like propounding riddles, or as when a mountebank says, 'Nothing can be easier to do if only a man is accustomed to walk on his head instead of on his legs.'" Well, yes, but for all that is it then so easy to do? . . . That is to say, for the idle and masterless thought, some sort of thought in general, the homeless thought which is no thought, the thought which buffets the air with indeterminants and undefined definitions . . . for the vagrant thought it is easy enough to perform the trick. But when it is a concrete thought, when it is my thought, or when it is thy thought, and . . . when thou art a sufferer . . . is this then so easy? And because it is a jest to be able to walk on one's head instead of on one's legs, is it therefore also a jest to look at everything inversely? Oh, far from it, or better, exactly the inverse is true, precisely this is seriousness, the seriousness of eternity.<sup>57</sup>

Kierkegaard here takes the reader through the steps involved in interpreting irony. First, a recognition that the statement cannot be taken as it stands and requires reconstruction, then an exploration of alternative reconstructions: as a jest, a bit of rhetorical cleverness

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<sup>57</sup> ChD, pp. 154-155.

to engage the intellect, or as an earnest message addressed to a sufferer. Finally, the point of view is given from which the irony is to be interpreted: the eternal. The irony carries within it the intention of Kierkegaard's discourse, to effect a change of loci by which worldly misfortune becomes a spiritual benefit to the sufferer, leading him or her to rely on God. (The title could have been "Worldly Misfortune is Spiritual Good Fortune"—a more "honest" expression of Kierkegaard's theme—but it would have bypassed an opportunity to engage the listener.) For an existing sufferer to interpret this change of loci, "it is required of him that he turn himself about,"<sup>58</sup> even if to others he may look like a clown. In reorienting the listener from the locus of the worldly to the locus of the spirit, the reconstruction of irony becomes a rhetorical expression for conversion.

According to Kierkegaard's schema, when a person has "conquered" irony in this way, by appropriating the Christian affirmation, it is no longer irony but humor. The force of Kierkegaard's distinction will be lost if we understand irony and humor as different verbal expressions. He sees them as different qualities of existence, so that a single expression may appear as ironic or humorous depending on a person's existential reconstruction. "Misfortune is good fortune" will appear as bitter irony to those who have known only good fortune, as well as to sufferers who refuse the consolation. But to those who "turn about,"

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<sup>58</sup> ChD, p. 156.

misfortune loses its bitterness and its ultimacy, and the sufferer can find joy in letting it strengthen the God-relationship.

Whenever the listener's existence is an element in the reconstruction there is indirection in the use of irony and humor, regardless of any subsequent verbal explanations. A person may "get" an ironic remark, but whether it brings a laugh or a frown is a reflection of how they "take" it. The speaker can and should have control over the possibilities for understanding irony, but not over its appropriation.

To summarize Kierkegaard's use of irony, there are four points:<sup>59</sup> (1) There is a disjunction between surface statement and underlying meaning, signalled by a set of internal or contextual clues (direct-indirect, overt-covert), and requiring a reconstruction. (2) The possibilities for reconstruction are fixed according to a range of application (local-infinite), and take one of two paths: affirmation (stable irony) or negation (unstable irony). (3) Reconstruction involves a choice between conflicting points of view or loci. (4) The choice is made according to the reader/listener's own self-awareness or existential orientation.

This pattern is not limited to irony, however, unless we understand irony as inclusive of all expressions that fall under point (1). With some modifications, it provides the general rhetorical structure of indirect communication, including metaphor, parable, story, and psychohistory. A few examples will make the point clearer.

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<sup>59</sup> Cf. Booth, pp. 10-12.

Consider the metaphor: "Faith is: setting out to sea in a leaky boat." (1) Clearly something more is meant than the literal statement, or the church would be manufacturing leaky boats along with communion wafers, and sailing would become the norm for Christian worship. We conclude that a similarity is implied, not an identity. (2) How is faith like setting out to sea in a leaky boat? Is it because of the risk involved? Is it the great eagerness to reach one's destination, so that one would take even a leaky boat in order to get there? Or is it because faith is foolish or impoverished, so that it doesn't stop to look or can't afford a decent boat? These are all possible affirmations suggested by the image. There are also implied negations: faith is not staying at home or taking a pleasure cruise. The range of the metaphor must also be considered: do its implications cover the whole nature of faith, just a part of it, or is this merely an idiosyncrasy of Kierkegaard's? (3) The possibilities of interpretation are not consistent with one another, but they can be combined into two or more internally consistent but mutually exclusive points of view--the view from the boat or the view from the shore. (4) Reconstruction reveals your own experience of faith. Some might say, "No, faith is certainty, just the opposite of risk; it is the rock of ages." Others, through lack of experience, may not connect with the metaphor at all. In this way, an apt metaphor is a test of the reader's experience. The task of reconstructing metaphor differs from that of irony in that metaphor (unless itself ironic) is always affirmative; reconstruction amounts to judging the nature and range of its affirmations, and the



locus in (3) is an addition or expansion rather than an alternative to the locus given in the metaphor: setting out to sea in a leaky boat really is an act of faith, but it is also an image for other acts of faith.

Many of Kierkegaard's parables are essentially ironies in story form or narrative metaphors,<sup>60</sup> so it is not surprising that they also follow the pattern of reconstruction. A man walks away from you while professing his happiness to see you;<sup>61</sup> an escapee from an asylum walks about proclaiming that the earth is round in order to prove his sanity—and is promptly recaptured;<sup>62</sup> a king issues a royal command, and instead of obeying, the whole kingdom becomes engaged in critical analysis and interpretation<sup>63</sup>—all of these present irony in a story or dramatic situation, and can be reconstructed accordingly. The main difference is that parable requires a parallel analysis of the story itself and the point it is illustrating. In the case of the man who backs away while saying hello, we are invited to dig beneath the surface of this inconsistent behavior. Is he lying to you, or does he sincerely think he's glad to see you, so perhaps he's lying to himself? Kierkegaard reconstructs the situation as an ironic psychological observation (overt/stable/general), that promises and intentions are not

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<sup>60</sup> Thomas Oden's term. Parables of Kierkegaard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. vii.

<sup>61</sup> WL, p. 102.

<sup>62</sup> CUP, p. 174.

<sup>63</sup> FSE, pp. 58-59.

an indication of action, but a substitute for it. He then extends the range of application:

The intention taken in vain, the unfulfilled promise leaves a residue of despondency, dejection, which perhaps soon again flares up in more passionate protestations of intention, which leaves behind only greater languor. As a drunkard constantly requires stronger and stronger stimulation--in order to become intoxicated, likewise the one who has fallen into intentions and promises constantly requires more and more stimulation--to walk backward.<sup>64</sup>

A shift of loci from a chance encounter on the street to the listener's own appropriation of the Gospel is provided by the larger context of the parable. At issue is the task of loving your neighbor, and Kierkegaard makes a sharp turn from our puzzling over the questions raised by his parables and analogies: "to swing away from the questions . . . in order instantaneously to bring the task to the questioner--what he has to do, as near to life as possible."<sup>65</sup> With few exceptions, this swing toward the listener's existence is the characteristic device of all Kierkegaard's parables. One who interprets a parable in this way

. . . has only a single scene, existence, and he has nothing to do with beautiful valleys and the like. His scene is not the fairyland of the imagination, where the poet's love evokes the perfect; nor is the scene in England, and the task to make sure of local color and historical exactness. His scene is--inwardness in existing as a human being."<sup>66</sup>

The shift of loci brings with it a transfer of feeling: the personal affront evoked by the parable of the man who walked backwards is turned on ourselves if we don't begin immediately to love the

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<sup>64</sup> WL, p. 102.

<sup>65</sup> WL, p. 103.

<sup>66</sup> CUP, pp. 319-320, cited by Oden, p. xiv.

neighbor. In Purity of Heart, when Kierkegaard compares despair over salvation to the last bubble that rises to the surface from a drowning man,<sup>67</sup> the stifling visceral fear of drowning is transferred to the religious sphere. This experience of an emotional transference is possibly the surest sign that a parable has reached home.

The elements of reconstruction as we have outlined them are not a fixed and invariable pattern, as these few examples should indicate. In the longer stories and allegories, several inter-related reconstructions may be needed; in other cases the point comes so quickly to mind that we are hardly aware of needing to think about it. Cataloguing the rich variety of Kierkegaard's indirections would be an odious task. Instead, I have tried to present a fair sketch of the range—and depth—finding, the choice of viewpoints, and the inward search that Kierkegaard has built into the structure of indirect communication.

As important as indirect communication was for Kierkegaard, he also came to see its limits. "It is a truly Christian invention," he wrote," which cannot be employed without fear and trembling, or without real self-denial."<sup>68</sup> By employing a kind of trickery, there is the danger that one will merely trick oneself. By "becoming nobody," one is deprived of the education about oneself that acting directly and in character can bring. Kierkegaard long felt the pain of being misunderstood, all the more so because he chose to be, and alternately

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<sup>67</sup> PH, pp. 64-65.

<sup>68</sup> PV, p. 26.

questioned his right to employ deception and considered it his religious duty: "Whether there is pride here as well, God knows best--before God I dare neither affirm nor deny this, for who knows himself well enough for this?"<sup>69</sup> In the same journal entry, he stated one limit to indirection that is all the more poignant in view of his solitary life: "For we human beings need each other, and in that there is already a directness."

An additional limit to indirection is of a different nature. It comes from the Christian demand to witness, to express what we believe unequivocally in life and action. Witnessing is after all the aim of indirect communication, to draw others out into the open, and it would be a sad irony if the communicator failed to do it as well. Kierkegaard's final "Attack" is in its own complex way an effort in this direction and whatever one may make of it, it is difficult to imagine that his authorship would move us as it does if he had died in a comfortable old age as Denmark's poet laureate.

#### MAIEUTIC

The maieutic is a midwife--Socrates' image for himself, and also a good one for the preacher's role in assisting the birth of the God-relationship in the listener. But from the Christian point of view there are always complications in this birth which must have their influence on the preacher's delivery. The Christian midwifery is

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<sup>69</sup> JP II, #1959.

distinguished from the Socratic by sin; the listener is presumed to be not merely ignorant of the truth, but polemically against it--"she" wants an abortion. To further complicate the situation, although the preacher seeks a live birth, he or she must remain resolutely "pro-choice," for a Christian conviction cannot survive as an unwanted child.

Christendom adds yet another problem: opposition to the truth is hidden under the illusion of agreement. Just as the pilgrim of Pilgrim's Progress could not persuade anyone to leave Vanity Faire because they thought they had arrived at their destination, it is most difficult to engage people in becoming Christians if they already think they are. The distinctive problem of a Christian culture is not that people don't believe what is true, but that they believe it falsely. In Kierkegaard's categories, if subjectivity is truth, then falsehood is also a subjective qualification. The possibilities for being in the wrong about Christianity are not simply propositional, but consist also in the way "Christian truth" is appropriated in the existence of the believer. For this reason a Christian preacher has to be equally concerned with proclamation of the Gospel and with all the possibilities, not just for misunderstanding, but for misappropriating it. Kierkegaard's maieutic is a development of this shadow side of Christian rhetoric. Although Kierkegaard identified maieutic most explicitly with the pseudonymous aesthetic works, it nonetheless plays an important role in the religious discourses, which concern us here.

The first task in maieutic is to identify with the listener: "if real success is to attend the effort to bring a man to a definite position, one must first of all take pains to find HIM where he is and begin there."<sup>70</sup> The need for identification is both diagnostic and rhetorical. An illusion can be dispelled only by entering into its internal logic; resistance can best be overcome when we identify the motives behind it. Anthropology and dialectic work together here as diagnostic tools.

Next, the identification must be established rhetorically, to keep the listeners from throwing up their defenses: "A direct attack only strengthens a person in his illusion, and at the same time embitters him."<sup>71</sup> At the very least the speaker must convince the listeners that he or she understands their situation, for the easiest escape from a challenge is for the listener to be able to say that the speaker "just doesn't understand." Kierkegaard even advises a certain amount of pandering to the audience:

for we take pains to talk ingratiatingly, if that is possible, about what men are generally pleased to hear, in order that no one shall be tempted to think it was stupidity or incompetence which kept us from speaking about it exclusively as if it were the highest, forgetting the main issue--Christianity.<sup>72</sup>

If, for example, you are going to decry the nuclear arms race, you might first speak patriotically. If you would urge your congregation to avoid cash crops, you emphasize your love of coffee.

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<sup>70</sup> PV, p. 27.

<sup>71</sup> PV, p. 25.

<sup>72</sup> WL, pp. 147-148.

Kierkegaard calls it "earnest money," a sign to the listeners that it is not through lack of understanding or appreciation that you ask them to deny their inclinations. One of the principal ways people come to understand and trust one another is by experiencing shared motives, and even if the preacher wants to extinguish a motive, he or she should give some indication of having felt it.

Identification is only the first step, however. The preacher who fails to move beyond it may be persuaded by the audience rather than persuading them. For Kierkegaard, identification is simply baiting the hook. The introduction to one of his "Thoughts which wound from behind" is a stark example. First the bait:

How quiet everything is in the house of God, what a sense of security. He who enters it feels as if by a single step he had arrived at a remote place, endlessly far away from all noise and outcry and vociferation, from the horrors of existence, from the storms of life, from the spectacle of dreadful events or from the sickly expectation of them. And here within, wherever thy glance is turned, everything gives thee a sense of security and peace . . .<sup>73</sup>

Then, after dwelling affectionately and with great aesthetic sensitivity on the sanctuary, he sets the hook:

How comforting, how inviting—ah, and how much danger in this security! Wherefore it is verily true that really it is only God in heaven who in the actuality of life can preach to men with effect; for He has circumstances, has fate, has consternation in his power. And circumstances—and when thou art in them, when they enclose "thee" as the party properly concerned—yea, their eloquence is piercing and awakening.<sup>74</sup>

Oh, in the customary course of life there is so much to lull a man to sleep, to teach him to say, "Peace and no danger."

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<sup>73</sup> ChD, p. 171.

<sup>74</sup> ChD, p. 171.

It is for this cause that we go into the house of God, to be awakened out of sleep and to be riven away from enchantments.<sup>75</sup>

The prose style of Kierkegaard's introduction "reduplicates" his message: in the initial paragraph the clauses are long, flowing into one another with a lulling effect. But then, watch it! The sentences are choppy, with shorter clauses and several dashes. Since one of the enchantments that we come to be riven away from is that worship consists in peace and quiet, Kierkegaard has reproduced that experience in his discourse. Furthermore, by dwelling on the common desire for security and peace, he demonstrates that he knows enough about that desire knowingly to reject it. Identification also serves to avoid an adversary relationship. When the attack comes, it is not "me" against "you," but "we" who feel the sting of the message.

Not all identification can be done en masse in this way, however. Different fish need different bait. Therefore, along with the speaker's broader participation in the perceptions of the audience there is a differentiation into a variety of individual viewpoints. As in the familiar story of the blind men describing an elephant, the discourse speaks to all about the elephant, but also to each one separately, depending on whether he thought it to be like a snake, a tree, a wall, or a rope. A different approach is needed to dispell the illusions of each. Thus, in the first discourse on "Every Good and Perfect Gift" Kierkegaard began a practice that he used in dozens of subsequent discourses. First he sets up the problem:

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<sup>75</sup> ChD, p. 173.



These words are so beautiful, so eloquent, so moving, that it was certainly not the fault of the words if they found no entrance into the listener's ear, no echo in his heart . . . They are said not incidentally but with special emphasis, not in passing but accompanied by an earnest admonition: Do not err, my beloved brethren.<sup>76</sup>

Here is one of the mainstays of Kierkegaard's hermeneutic: the sources of misunderstanding lie within the listener. Yet each one misunderstands differently. The first half of the discourse is devoted to a series of psychohistories of different character-types in their encounter with the text. First, the fortunate:

Carelessly they go on their way, a friendly fate makes everything so easy for them, every wish is fulfilled, all their undertakings are successful . . . Unconcerned about how it happened they are borne along on the wave of the present.<sup>77</sup>

And their characteristic misappropriation:

They let their thought occupy itself for a moment with the words, and then they said: "Now we have understood them, bring us some new thoughts which we have not understood." Nor would they have been wrong; for the apostle's words are not difficult, and yet they proved thereby, in that after having understood them they wished to abandon them, that they had not understood them.<sup>78</sup>

Next, those who suffer:

. . . those whom life did not suckle on the milk of prosperity, but who were early weaned from it; the sorrowing, whose thought attempted to penetrate through the changing to the permanent—those were conscious of the apostle's words and gave attention to them.<sup>79</sup>

And their misappropriation:

At last perhaps it seemed to them that these words were almost dangerous to their peace of mind. They awakened a confidence in them which was constantly being disappointed. They gave them wings

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<sup>76</sup> ED I, 35.

<sup>77</sup> ED I, 36.

<sup>78</sup> ED I, 37.

<sup>79</sup> ED I, 37.

which could indeed lift them up to God, but which could not help them in their walk through life.<sup>80</sup>

The discourse continues with two more characters: the wishful, who would choose among God's gifts, and the defiant, who bear a hidden resentment at their need to receive. In each case the strength of Kierkegaard's argument is in the psychological accuracy of his portrayal, and in demonstrating the link between character and the form of misappropriation. To the extent that you recognize yourself in these characters, you are warned against first one misinterpretation and then another.

Behind this approach we can see both the dialectic and the anthropology at work. Dialectically, the thought of the text is combined with a specific mode of existence and thought through or played out to its conclusion (indirect proof), and these modes are then combined to provide multiple points of view on the text. In this way Kierkegaard provides not a single interpretation of the text, but a matrix of interpretation which is coordinated with the personal variations among the listeners. The maieutic applications of Kierkegaard's dialectic are as varied as the dialectic itself, but here are some of the more common strategems:

1. Developing the negative. To cut off misappropriations, it is as important to understand what Christianity is not as to develop what it is. Thus, in presenting his major points in Works of Love, Kierkegaard consistently gives the negative along with the positive:

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<sup>80</sup> ED I, 37-38.

Love is a matter of conscience and thus is not a matter of impulse and inclination or a matter of feeling or a matter of intellectual calculation.<sup>81</sup>

. . . the task is not: to find—the lovable object; but the task is: to find the object already given or chosen—lovable, and to be able to continue finding him lovable, no matter how he becomes changed.<sup>82</sup>

. . . it holds true that in loving actual individual men one does not slip in a fanciful idea about how one thinks or could wish this man should be.<sup>83</sup>

Each of these negations eliminates a corresponding deception, e.g., "I will love the neighbor, if only I will be allowed to choose a lovable neighbor," or "By loving this man I will make him over into what I think he should be." Kierkegaard works like a good tax lawyer, finding loopholes—but then closing them off.

2. Neither/Nor. People tend to think in terms of opposites: if you say a dog is not black, they may well conclude that it is white. Or, as Luther put it, the world is like a drunken peasant: you help him up on one side of his horse, and he falls off on the other. Consequently, when Kierkegaard attacks one form of illusion he ordinarily goes after its opposite as well, and anything in between:

It is corruption when the poor man shrivels up in his poverty so that he lacks the courage to will to be built up by Christianity. It is also corruption when a prominent man wraps himself in his prominence in such a way that he shrinks from being built up by Christianity. And it is also corruption if he whose distinction is to be like the majority of people never comes out of this distinction through Christian elevation.<sup>84</sup>

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81 WL, p. 143.

82 WL, p. 158.

83 WL, p. 161.

84 WL, p. 85.

The problem here is to keep up the dialectical tension, not allowing the point to be smoothed over by comparisons, not allowing people to forget their own distinctive form of deception. In the example above, the danger is that the listeners will slip back into the crowd with the excuse that "we're all corrupt," instead of struggling to free their Christian identity from social determinations. There are no dialectical panaceas; the speaker simply needs to be aware that every strategem for preventing deception can open the way for new ones.

3. The art of taking away. Faith and uncertainty go together; when a person expresses certainty of salvation, their faith is caught in an illusion, and it is the preacher's Christian responsibility to insert a little doubt, as Kierkegaard does here:

No, away from me, dreadful assurance; save me, O God, from ever becoming quite sure, preserve me until the last in insecurity, so that then, if I attain blessedness, I might be quite sure that I receive it of grace! For this is a hollow sham, to protest that one believes it to be of grace—and yet to be quite sure.<sup>85</sup>

As with a person whose mouth is too stuffed to chew, where Christianity is overly familiar and over believed, "the art of communication at last becomes the art of taking away."<sup>86</sup> The difficulty of this art is in casting doubt on the listener's complacency without appearing to cast doubt on Christianity at the same time. Here the preacher needs real humility, for listeners accustomed to measuring a person's faith by their degree of certainty are likely to conclude that the preacher is not much of a Christian.

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<sup>85</sup> ChD, p. 218.

<sup>86</sup> CUP, p. 245n.

4. Repulsion. This is a variation on the art of taking away, directed against the over-eager. The technique is to thrust the listeners back a step from Christianity by showing that it entails presuppositions or consequences that they are reluctant to accept. Kierkegaard is constantly warning his readers that if they want to be happy, successful, and well-liked, they had better avoid Christianity at all costs. In one of his introductions, he applies the technique to so simple a matter as listening to a sermon. He begins with a little exercise in logic:

He who wills the end must will the means. But this involves, does it not, the assumption or admission that a man knows what he wills. This being assumed, we bring him to a halt by the "means" by saying, "Then thou must also will the means."

Then, the application:

So it is with the edifying, which verily is the Good in-and-for-itself, and precisely for this reason must require that the individual who would be edified has understood himself, lest light-mindedly, in a worldly spirit, thoughtlessly wishful, he takes the edifying in vain, and then will say, I beg to be excused, when he gets to know more exactly what it is.

For what is the edifying? The first answer to this tells what the edifying first is: it is the dismaying.<sup>87</sup>

The introduction is to the first of a series of discourses on joy and suffering, and in it Kierkegaard sets out the presupposition of the whole series: that if we are to speak of Christian joy, we must first speak of suffering.

It is easy to over-estimate the strength of a logical argument in religious discourse. Listeners who are adept at logic can find their

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<sup>87</sup> ChD, p. 101.

own evasions; those who are not can simply discount it because they don't follow it. Kierkegaard's effectiveness here lies in the element of surprise. The vocabulary of logic sets up a neutral screen that is suddenly drawn away in the application, and it is this surprise that produces the repulsion he desires.

These techniques are all examples of what we have called "quasi-logical" forms of argument. They involve examining presuppositions and consequences, distinguishing various forms of misappropriation, and dissociating them from Christianity or from the Gospel text. They are aimed at bringing deception into the awareness of the listener. But quasi-logical argument is still an appeal to reason, and it takes more than reasons to change the heart. People may "know" they are living an illusion, but if the illusion is more satisfying than reality, they will cling to it. To cut off illusion, it is finally necessary to change the desire. Here Kierkegaard turns to dialogical forms of development, especially the psychohistory, in order to work on the underlying motives for deception.

A preacher cannot alter the course of a person's inward development by a mere command. As Kierkegaard notes, the listener will just become evasive:

Denounce the magical charm of aesthetics—well, there have indeed been times when you might have succeeded in coercing people. But with what result? With the result that privately, with secret passion, they love that magic. No, let it come out.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> PV, p. 29.

The maieutic technique is not to deny the motives, but to draw them out, to let them have their place in the discourse. To return to our fishing analogy (which few Christian preachers, including Jesus, have been able to resist), you need to let the fish play itself out before trying to reel it in—or it will likely snap the line. The preacher appeals to the motive in order to exhaust it. This is the usual course with Kierkegaard's psychohistories, as here with the "wishful" in "Every Good and Perfect Gift":

But the wish was not fulfilled. Vainly you sought rest; you left nothing untried in your unfruitful restlessness; you ascended the dizzying heights of anticipation to see if a possibility might not appear. If you believed that you saw such a possibility, then you were immediately ready with prayers, that by the help of these you might create the actual from the apparent. Still it was an illusion. You descended again, and gave yourself up to the stupefying exhaustion of sorrow, while time went on as it always does. And the morning came, and the evening, but the day you desired did not dawn.<sup>89</sup>

The focus on motive here is heightened by the fact that the wish is never named; only the inward struggle is apparent. The outer reality is diminished to "appearance," "dizzying," "illusion." By the same means, application is extended—it could be any wish, and therefore your wish. There is also the sense of a long time passing; even an echo of the language of Genesis ("and morning came, and evening") enhances the feeling of desire grown weary.

At this point Kierkegaard makes his move to transform the motive:

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<sup>89</sup> ED I, 40.

But when the busy thoughts had worked themselves weary, when the fruitless wishes had exhausted your soul, then perhaps your being became more quiet, then perhaps your heart, secretly and unnoticed, had developed in itself the meekness which received the word which was implanted in you, and which was able to save your soul, that every good and perfect gift cometh from above.

Then you acknowledged in all humility that God had certainly not deceived you, since He accepted your earthly wishes and foolish desires, exchanged them for you, and gave you instead heavenly consolation and holy thoughts.<sup>90</sup>

There is a subtle shift here from narration to the hypothetical "perhaps," which leaves an opening for the listener's decision. The dialectical form is that of an "if . . . then" statement: if you became "meek," then you received the word. In this way dialectical and motivational viewpoints interlock, the latter charting the inward development while the former gives account of the corresponding change in relation to the text—a pattern which is characteristic of Kierkegaard's psychohistories.

A variation on the psychohistory is the personification of the motive for deception in a figure who then serves as a dialogue-partner in the discourse. Two of Kierkegaard's personifications are directly tied to the stages, and to the corresponding structure of motives: "the poet" as a representative of the aesthetic stage and "the shrewd" as a representative of the worldly-wise prudential ethic. They serve as co-interpreters, illusion running parallel to the truth, and close enough to the truth that "it sounds almost as if [the poet] said what

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<sup>90</sup> ED I, 40.



the Gospel says."<sup>91</sup> The listeners can identify their illusions in the poetic or the shrewd without feeling accused by the speaker.

We have spoken of motive as a positive force in deception, but there are also negative motives, such as the desire to avoid the unpleasant consequences of the truth. Thus, when confronted by a text a listener gravitates toward the least conflictual interpretation possible, and preachers of the Gospel may easily pander to this tendency by constantly seeking "good news" for their congregations. The text becomes "easy" (both simple and pleasant) to understand when we are able to avoid the conflicts it poses. When Jesus tells a rich young man to sell all he has and give to the poor, we say that Jesus meant this only for him, because he was too attached to wealth. We may even venture to say with Kierkegaard's Bishop Mynster, "If it was demanded of me, I would be willing." The secret is never to interpret the unpleasant as a demand. And, if the difficulties seem unavoidable there is the last resort of claiming that the words are too profound and mysterious to be understood.

The maieutic approach in this case is to seek out the difficult, to induce the necessary labor pains. The listeners are encouraged to sort out the barriers to understanding that lie in the text from those that lie in themselves:

Or, my hearer, was there perhaps no occasion in your life when you found these words difficult? . . . What was it, then, that made them difficult for you?<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> ChD, p. 319.

<sup>92</sup> ED I, 50-51.

Is then the apostolic word . . . a dark and difficult saying? And if you believe that you cannot understand it, dare you assert that you have wished to understand it? Have you said to yourself: "I certainly understand the apostolic word, but I also understand that I am too cowardly, or too proud, or too sluggish rightly to wish to understand it?"<sup>93</sup>

No less than thirteen questions follow immediately on those above, exhaustively probing our resistance to the text. The pain of self-recognition is rhetorically embodied in this laborious catalogue of illusions. Even if Kierkegaard didn't name your particular evasion, you have the feeling that he would get around to it, given a few more pages. Behind this rhetorical browbeating is the conviction that the points of resistance to the text are indicators of where the listeners' illusions lie, and it is precisely at those points that the maieutic goes to work.

The final step in maieutic is suggested by the chain of questions above. Their summary effect is that of a litany of confession. This is the appropriate response to the discovery of an illusion, which is after all a lie to oneself, and the way to correct it is not only to admit the truth, but to confess to the lie. Anyone who has engaged in an argument with a person who constantly shifts positions without acknowledging the change will be aware of the problem. At the conclusion they arrive at the truth as if they had always believed it, in much the same way as one can arrive at the correct answer to a mathematical problem through a series of miscalculations. Agreements of this sort carry no weight because they are accidental. This is

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<sup>93</sup> ED I, 48, 49.

especially the case with Christianity, where truth is not propositional but existential. Truth and illusion are both functions of personality, and arriving at the truth about Christianity requires not an ahistorical change of mind but a change of being which necessarily includes the personal history of the believer. In the familiar theological language, to receive the Gospel, we must repent.

So Kierkegaard's maieutic finally amounts to the indirect preaching of repentance. Consistent with his position in the Postscript that the personality achieves clarity in the "totality of guilt-consciousness," Kierkegaard presents repentance in the religious discourses as the only cure for self-delusion. And like the consciousness of sin which accompanies it, repentance is not a one-time affair but an ongoing part of the Christian life, a part of the Christian's style of thinking. The human capacity for generating illusions is like a disease which cannot be eradicated, but only held in check by constant treatment. In preaching this means that repentance is not seen as a discrete action, set apart from the Gospel as the price of admission to Christianity, or as an occasional response to an ethical-religious judgment laid upon the listener by the preacher. Repentance is a constant and integral part of understanding the Gospel each time it is preached. By working to divert the listeners from their misunderstanding, Kierkegaard develops not just the moral, but the epistemological aspect of repentance. To understand the Gospel is to repent of one's cherished misunderstandings. And here is the pathos of maieutic preaching: no enlightenment without a corresponding

disillusionment, no new Christian self-understanding without an element of self-rejection--no birth without pain.

#### REDUPLICATION AND ETHICAL PROOF

In Chapter Three we introduced Kierkegaard's term "reduplication" as an expression for the final stage of the existential dialectic: the embodiment of a person's thoughts in decisive action. In Chapter Four, we saw that the reduplication of Christian convictions formed the basis of Kierkegaard's conception of pastoral authority. We now need to come to a more precise understanding of how reduplication functions in Christian rhetoric.

From a rhetorical standpoint reduplication is Kierkegaard's version of the classical concept of ethical proof, the influence of the perceived character of the speaker on the audience's reception of the speech. For Aristotle, the main factor in ethical proof was that the audience should have a favorable impression of the speaker; they should like him, trust him, and be led to believe that he has their best interests at heart. He saw no necessary connection between the speaker's character and the subject of the speech--talk about whatever you like, and if the audience likes you, they'll be more inclined to agree with you. Furthermore, the speaker's character has no interpretive function for Aristotle, only a persuasive one. The audience's perception of the speaker does not have a significant influence on how they understand the speech, only on whether they concur with it.

The Aristotelian position on ethical proof played a major role in homiletics during the last half of the nineteenth century, especially in America. Phillips Brooks' idea of preaching as the communication of "truth through personality" gave the idea its clearest expression, but Henry Ward Beecher and a long tradition of Yale lecturers continued to emphasize the "power of personality" as the key factor for "success in the pulpit."<sup>94</sup>

Among the aspects of a preacher's personality most frequently singled out for praise were "attractiveness," "sincerity," "enthusiasm," "manliness" and "personal magnetism." Kierkegaard attributed the popularity of his Bishop Mynster to the same qualities: "powerful as he is in his personal presence . . . [he] expresses the purely human in the most masterful way I have ever seen."<sup>95</sup>

Yet Kierkegaard found this notion of ethical proof to be "enormously demoralizing." The first problem with it is that the pastor becomes an object of admiration, which in Kierkegaard's categories signals an aesthetic relationship: "Ethically speaking there is nothing so conducive to sound sleep as admiration of another person's ethical reality."<sup>96</sup> Furthermore, if a pastor tries to persuade by force of personal attraction, he or she ceases to speak as a real person and becomes an actor representing an ideally attractive pastor. Finally,

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<sup>94</sup> Cf. Batsell B. Baxter, The Heart of the Yale Lectures (New York: Macmillan, 1947), pp. 17ff.; and the critique in Thor Hall The Future Shape of Preaching (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), pp. 107ff.

<sup>95</sup> JP I, #663.

<sup>96</sup> CUP, p. 322.

ethical proof in the Aristotelian mode leads to a confusion between humanly pleasing (and culturally determined) personal characteristics and Christianity:

Pastors have finally ceased to be what they actually ought to be to the point that, in relation to what it really means to be a pastor, the factors by which they make a big hit and become honored, respected and esteemed etc. are completely irrelevant—namely, that they are good mixers, people who can take part in anything, administer, deliver occasional addresses, in short, be a sort of more elegant edition of an undertaker.—Or in another manner, that for which they actually come to be regarded—for example, being somewhat scholarly, etc.—is irrelevant to what it is to be a pastor.<sup>97</sup>

We should acknowledge that many of these characteristics are helpful to pastors in performing the hodge-podge of duties that are thrust upon them, and that particularly in the counseling role it is necessary that parishioners hold a high degree of trust in their pastor. But when these criteria are applied to the sermon, and serve as warrants for believing, a devastating confusion results. Sociability and personal attractiveness (including a favorite target of Kierkegaard's: "the cut of the pastoral gown") become jumbled up with being a Christian. Kierkegaard got plenty of material for satire from this phenomenon, but I can find no better illustration of the problem it poses in ethical and religious discourse than in the following conclusion to a speech by Dr. Helen Caldicott, an antinuclear activist:

Her presentation finished, Caldicott was asked what each woman sitting around her could do. "Capture your initiative and get moving," she replied.

Another woman stood up and gushed, "First of all, I want to absolutely applaud your magnificence. I'm thrilled to have you in

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<sup>97</sup> JP III, #3157.

my world and to know there is a queen out there. I love your femininity and everything about you."<sup>98</sup>

Of course we cannot hold Dr. Caldicott directly responsible for this woman's outburst, but it does illustrate the rhetorical problem. Caldicott's "femininity" as such has nothing to do with the dangers of nuclear technology, and the listener who is persuaded by it will make a poor spokesperson for her cause.

It should not be surprising, then, that Kierkegaard found it necessary to rethink the role of ethical proof. There was no question of eliminating it altogether, for it is not an optional rhetorical strategy. A speech is an act of the speaker, and its reception by the audience will be influenced by their perceptions of the speaker whether he/she likes it or not. It is doubtful that even a consistent practice of indirect communication coupled with complete anonymity could eliminate ethical proof. The rhetorical issue is how much control the speaker can exercise over this process.

Kierkegaard's solution was to apply his idea of reduplication to rhetoric. In doing so, he reversed Aristotle's position on two counts. Kierkegaard held that in Christian discourse the speaker's character influences the meaning of the speech, not just the audience's assent or dissent, and that for this reason, only those aspects of the preacher's character that are relevant to the Christian message should be brought to bear in the sermon. Kierkegaard reasoned that because Christianity

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<sup>98</sup> Joy Horowitz, "Women Unite Against Nuclear Power," Los Angeles Times (April 23, 1979), Part IV, p. 11.

is an "existence-communication," it is finally interpreted in the lives and actions of individual Christians. The pastor's life thus forms a context of interpretation; for better or for worse, it influences the meaning of his or her sermons for the congregation. Kierkegaard gave this thesis a quasi-logical form (see above, Ch. 3, p. 130) which bears repeating here:

The truly Christian proclamation contains in its major premise that which is proclaimed and has within its minor premise, or as supporting premise, a dialectically qualified existing person (from which we see also how crucial personality is for the true proclamation of Christianity).<sup>99</sup>

In a journal entry from the same period Kierkegaard gives an illustration:

It is existence which preaches, not the mouth. Take three clergymen from three different stations in life: a prelate, a well-to-do parish pastor, a mendicant friar who is actually an ascetic. All three preach about "the daily bread" for which we pray; perhaps they say the same thing—but the speaker, his character, his daily existence provide the interpretation here.<sup>100</sup>

In each case what we would call the lifestyle of the preacher suggests to the congregation what he really thinks the text means in existence: elegance for one, state-supported security for another, a hand-to-mouth existence for the third.

Kierkegaard's point rests on a more basic assumption about how language acquires meaning. To say something and "mean" it is to intend what is said. But if one does not act in a manner consistent with the verbal meaning of one's speech, it becomes ironic, and eventually

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<sup>99</sup> JP III, #3513.

<sup>100</sup> JP III, #3509.



meaningless. Kierkegaard says that words are like paper money: you have to have the gold to back them up. Our language is full of expressions that have no more gold behind them: e.g., "I'll be damned." Christian preaching is subject to the same semantic drain. As Paul Holmer put it, "To lose the meaning of religious words is not like losing their definitions—it is more like losing the practice with which they were associated."<sup>101</sup> Kierkegaard's anger at pastors whose lives were a blatant contradiction of the gospel they preached was not simply moralistic. He thought they were eroding the meaning of Christianity.

The problems posed by Kierkegaard's position extend beyond the traditional domain of rhetoric, which is normally confined to factors that can be controlled by the speaker at the time of the speech. There are, however, some consequences for ethical proof that should be mentioned here.

Because of this semantic relationship between the person of the preacher and the words of the sermon, the preacher is obliged to treat his or her presentation of self as a form of argument. As a kind of proof—using the term loosely—the speaker's character is subject to constraints similar to those on other forms of proof: consistency, appropriateness, comparison with other evidence. For example, when a recent politician answered a challenge to one of his policies by saying, "Trust me," not only did he overestimate the weight of his character as evidence, he also offered an argument inappropriate to the process of

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<sup>101</sup> Paul Holmer, The Grammar of Faith (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 133.

public deliberation which is presupposed by democracy. The personal attributes that have to be judged by the standards range from the apparently trivial—haircuts, three-piece suits, a nice smile—to expressions of the pastor's deepest emotions. The main task here is to see that ethical proof is not based on characteristics extraneous to Christianity, and to neutralize anything that might encourage an admiring aesthetic response in the listeners.

Second, in direct communication ("witnessing") the preacher's existential relationship to the text should be carefully and honestly presented. Kierkegaard's ideal is that "If the proclamation is to be true, it must produce what it proclaims. For example, if the proclamation is that the Christian suffers in this world, then the proclaimer must also suffer."<sup>102</sup> This is reduplication in the strictest sense, but it is difficult to know how far Kierkegaard intends to go here; would preaching about martyrdom entail the death of the preacher? Kierkegaard occasionally shows a touch of perversity in his notions about the effects of reduplication in preaching. He has a recurrent fantasy about a preacher who proclaims that the true Christian is persecuted in this world—and is promptly persecuted by the congregation. He seems to lose the distinction between demonstrating the cost of discipleship with your own life and merely provoking people. Applied to his own situation in Denmark, Kierkegaard's reflections on suffering, persecution, and martyrdom seem slightly paranoid.

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<sup>102</sup> JP III, #3524.

But he was also exploring the limits of what reduplication demands of a preacher. The valid point he makes is that if the aim of preaching is to produce in life what is proclaimed in the Gospels—"on earth as it is in heaven"—then the task applies first to the speaker. In some contexts persecution, even martyrdom, may be consequences. For Archbishop Romero in El Salvador or Dom Helder Camara in Brazil it has been impossible to preach the Gospel without coming under the threat of death. Over a century later, they confirm Kierkegaard in raising martyrdom as the final standard for reduplication.

A more universal statement of Kierkegaard's position, applicable from martyrs to suburban seminary interns, is that the preacher can venture no farther out in a sermon than he or she has done in life. Or, to state the matter positively, in direct communication, "Only in character do I actually have the right to talk about what Christianity is . . ."<sup>103</sup> Kierkegaard stresses that anyone who lives out of his or her Christian convictions will have no trouble speaking of these in a sermon:

No, just as in a well-appointed house one is not obliged to go downstairs to fetch water, but by pressure already has it on the upper floors merely by turning the tap, so too it is with the real Christian orator, who, just because Christianity is his life, has eloquence, and precisely the right eloquence, close at hand, immediately present to him . . .<sup>104</sup>

It is a common human trait that we speak best on what is nearest to our hearts, on the most familiar aspects of our lives, and Kierkegaard

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<sup>103</sup> JP III, #3019.

<sup>104</sup> FSE, p. 36.

applies this fact to the preacher. He also finds this to be the source of the "eloquence" of the New Testament: the apostle is so busy struggling to live out his Christian faith that he has no time for elaborate compositions, but "with matchless agility tosses off a few words to keep a congregation on the move."<sup>105</sup> Whatever the historical inaccuracy, Kierkegaard's point about rhetoric stands: the preacher's own life of faith is his or her greatest source of eloquence--or greatest limitation.

We should not conclude from these remarks that Kierkegaard would limit the content of the Gospel in preaching to what the preacher has actualized. The rest must still be preached, but it must be preached confessionally, to the preacher's own condemnation:

. . . what commands does Christ give to his own? He who does not give up everything he possesses cannot be my disciple. I shudder in uttering these words. I accuse myself first of all. I must declare my own condemnation first of all. How do we have the audacity to preach such truths to people, yes, even merely to read them, we who not only do not give up everything we possess but struggle to gain more? But if our consciences condemn us, should we therefore hide what is written? No, I will not make myself guilty of a double crime, I will confess, confess before the entire people what the gospel says and what I still have not fulfilled.<sup>106</sup>

Or, as he writes in another journal entry:

The main point is always this--to regain an awareness of where we are, so that we do not make a fool of God by having Holy Scripture and then leaving out what we find to be too good and eventually thinking that it does not exist.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> JP IV, #4781.

<sup>106</sup> JP III, #3162.

<sup>107</sup> JP III, #3516.

Just as there are counter-persuasive techniques for avoiding a false attraction to the text because of an aesthetic relation to the speaker, there are also techniques for keeping the speaker's personal limitations from limiting the text: consider the familiar "Do as I say, not as I do," or Paul's "We have this treasure in earthen vessels." Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca call these "techniques of severance and restraint."<sup>108</sup> Kierkegaard's use of Anti-Climacus to express the Christian ideal is a case in point. By using a fictitious character he tried to cut off any rejection of his position based on his personal failure to live up to it. As we have noted earlier, the more common strategy is to insert personal admissions, e.g., "I also am too much coddled."<sup>109</sup>

Important as they are, the limitation of such strategies is that with a steady diet of confession, confession replaces the ideal as a norm. Instead of loving the neighbor, for example, the standard for being a Christian becomes to confess that you do not. But an ideal is no more than a fantasy unless we expect it to be enacted. If the Christian ideals are to remain in force, eventually someone has to stop confessing and take action.

A final point about ethical proof is that what applies to the preacher's ability to interpret the Gospel in word and action also applies to the congregation's ability to understand it. Our enactment

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<sup>108</sup> Chaim Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, The New Rhetoric (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), pp. 310-16.

<sup>109</sup> FSE, p. 38.

of Christianity is, for Kierkegaard, a primary factor in our coming to understand and believe it. The action or inaction of the congregation—the ethos they provide—thus forms the boundary of what they can hear and understand. Just as people may not be able to follow a logical demonstration without a background in logic, they may not be able to follow ethical proof without the requisite personal experience. People with no real conception of poverty cannot understand what it is to preach good news to the poor, and cannot recognize that good news when it is preached to them. Perhaps the best way to understand Luke 4:18 is not to consult a commentary, but to get in touch with the poor, the captive, and the oppressed.

In this way preaching is circumscribed by the life and activity of the church. The more fully Christianity is enacted, the more fully it can be preached. Thus it is not only for the sake of Christian action, but for the sake of the Christian Gospel that preaching must "clear for action."

## Chapter VI

## SUMMARY AND CRITIQUE

Despite his scorn of any craving after world-historical significance, Kierkegaard occasionally reflected on what his own place in history would be. He tended to associate it with whatever project currently engaged him. It is not surprising, then, that when he was at work on the "Dialectic of Ethical and Ethical-Religious Communication" he felt his significance to rest on his own distinctive conception of communication.<sup>1</sup> We should now be in a position to evaluate Kierkegaard's projection, although we will not be concerned here with whether his Christian rhetoric is his most significant contribution, nor will we try to trace his historical significance much beyond the situation of contemporary North American homiletics. In this chapter and the next I will evaluate first the contributions, and then what I take to be the shortcomings of Kierkegaard's Christian rhetoric, along with some suggested directions for further study. In making such an evaluation we will be introducing some concerns which were extrinsic to Kierkegaard's own concept of his task. He chose not to complete or publish many of his explicit reflections on communication, and thus did not produce a rhetorical theory for public consumption; he didn't want to attract any "undialectical" imitators. His rhetoric was mainly for his own use, uniquely adapted to his battle with Christendom in

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<sup>1</sup> JP I, #645.

mid-nineteenth century Denmark. We should not be surprised therefore if in many respects it may be unsuited to our own present needs.

#### SUMMARY

Before entering into a critique of Kierkegaard's rhetoric it may be helpful to get a brief overview of the rhetoric as we have reconstructed it. The basic structure shows its ancestry in Aristotle: a statement of the aims of rhetoric; a grounding in a theory of argument (dialectic), the nature of the audience (anthropology and psychology), and the special characteristics of the major topics (politics, law, and public morality for Aristotle, Christianity for Kierkegaard); and finally the derivation of verbal strategies from these foundations.

The similarity, however, is purely formal. Where Aristotle's summary aim is persuasion, Kierkegaard's is edification, the development of a person's character in conformity with Christ. Where classical rhetoric aimed at rendering judgment on a particular exigency, Kierkegaard's focused on the inward conditions of decision itself and its place in the self-understanding of the listener. He sought individuation instead of consensus.

The contrast in aims is reflected in the way Aristotle and Kierkegaard structure their respective anthropological components. Since Aristotle was mainly concerned with discrete acts of persuasion, he could suffice with a catalogue of character types, moods, and emotions, and their influence on the listener's receptivity. To promote self-understanding in his listeners, however, Kierkegaard had to pull



all these elements together into a coherent structure of the self. Likewise it was not sufficient for the purposes of edification simply to trace a motive to its satisfaction in the proposals offered by the speaker. Kierkegaard needed a schema of how the motives themselves develop and change in the religious life, how they are extinguished and transformed. This was provided by his concept of the "stages." Finally, where Aristotle's rhetoric could fan out into a variety of audiences and rhetorical occasions, Kierkegaard's had only one: the individual in his or her relationship to God. This presented him with the peculiar problem of how to address a multitude of distinct individuals at once, yet without simply lumping them together. The problem was solved by identifying the God-relationship as the universal principle of individuation. This notion of spiritual equality gave him a single locus communis around which he could co-ordinate the differences among individuals. Like many theological anthropologies, Kierkegaard's makes no claim to being "scientific" or objectively verifiable; it is primarily an interpretive construct of the structure and development of self-consciousness.

A similar contrast occurs with dialectic. Aristotle's was a mode of argument aimed at finding the course of action most likely to realize common values in an uncertain situation. Kierkegaard's dialectic turns inward to valuations themselves; it is modeled on the self-dialogue of human consciousness, especially as it confronts the ultimate uncertainty of God. The dialectic therefore centers on the "archeology" of convictions, and their role in the formation of the

self. It seeks appropriate forms of justifying or refuting these convictions by exploring their consequences (indirect proof), their expression in action (existential proof), and their mutual coherence and consistency in the integrity of the person. Thus although Kierkegaard's dialectic retains the classical rhetorical function of governing the invention and disposition of arguments, it is completely adapted to his view of the special requirements and limits of ethical-religious discourse. The Aristotelian form remains as a quantitative dialectic alongside Kierkegaard's qualitative dialectic, and the rhetorical aim determines which is to be used.

Running through Kierkegaard's rich variety of argumentative forms is the conviction that edification is also "an aspect of cognition."<sup>2</sup> As such it is not served by a hortatory advancement of convictions without regard for their justification or the processes by which they were formed. Nor is it served by a rationalism that fails to observe its own limitations, and thereby becomes irrational. For Kierkegaard, the reasons of the heart have their own logic, their own proofs and fallacies, and these are what he sought to give structure and clarity in his dialectic.

Among the theological foundations, the presence of God as the primary communicator led Kierkegaard to a fundamental restructuring of the rhetorical situation. Instead of serving as a channel for the Word of God, the preacher was conceived as a "prompter" whose words were

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<sup>2</sup> JP II, #1588.

secondary to the primary communication between God and the listener in the listener's own conscience in its confrontation with scripture. In Kierkegaard's view the God-relationship required that a person be alone before God, so it was necessary to develop counter-persuasive techniques to keep the listener from attaching himself or herself to the preacher or to other members of the congregation. In addition, by eliminating an implied charismatic relationship to God as a norm for preaching, Kierkegaard made Christian rhetoric theologically permissible, for rhetoric is limited to factors that are in the speaker's control.

Perhaps the most important theological factor in Kierkegaard's divergence from classical rhetoric comes from the Christian presumption of sin. The Aristotelian tradition assumed that people had a natural preference for truth over falsehood. Accordingly classical rhetoric is presentational; it seeks to make the truth stand out as clearly, vividly, and attractively as possible. For Kierkegaard the reality of sin precluded such a rhetoric. People were polemically against the truth. He thought that you had just as well hand your money to a thief for safekeeping as make a direct presentation of Christianity. On the other hand, Christianity is based on a revelation, so it has to be presented in some way. You can't pry it out of people, because it is not in them.

The effect of this dilemma was to split Kierkegaard's rhetoric into two poles. The negative pole aimed at tricking people out of their illusions, "attacking from behind," cutting off escape routes, and raising the possibility of offense. Kierkegaard gave it the summary

term "maieutic" to indicate its Socratic ancestry. The positive pole tried to let offense become the occasion for faith, to present Christianity as it is lived out and in a form that required active appropriation. The major rhetorical categories here are "witnessing," "reduplication," and "communication of capability." The two poles are not unlike electrical contacts: they are charged and waiting only for the listener to complete the circuit. But if either pole is missing, nothing happens. The main fault Kierkegaard found in the preaching of his time was that, like classical rhetoric it was overwhelmingly positive, even when it spoke of sin. Without the negative battle with misappropriation, the truth may be heard, but it is heard falsely, and generates no real energy in the listener.

Within the framework of this polarity we see other pairs that are correlated with it, although they do not have fixed negative or positive functions, but change their "charge" with the context. Thus in the dialectic between self-reflection and action, Kierkegaard may urge one person trapped in reflection to act and another who is frantically busy to reflect. The approach to Christ oscillates between atonement and imitation. Christian doctrine is treated now under the rubric of subjectivity-as-truth, and now again as obedience to authority. The mode of communication itself shifts constantly from direct to indirect. One mode guides, urges, speaks intimately; the other breaks away, setting up parables and puzzles for the listener to reconstruct. This alternation creates tension in the listener, and this tension, passion,

he hoped, strung within a tight dialectical framework, is a main source of Kierkegaard's power as a rhetorician.

Our study has concentrated on identifying the formal structure of Kierkegaard's rhetoric. This I believe is consistent with his own definition of the task of rhetoric: to present the truth in its truest form. Christian truth is a form of being: it has to be enacted in existence and form the character. Kierkegaard's guiding insight in rhetoric was that the form of presentation governs how a message will be appropriated. Consequently his rhetoric tries to replicate the appropriation process of Christianity, engaging all the personal resources of the hearer, and adapting Christian discourse to the inward shape of the Christian life.

It would be a mistake, however, to convert this structure into an ordered sequence of rules to be applied in writing sermons. Kierkegaard's rhetoric, like its object, and like the process of communication itself, has an organic unity which we have simply broken down into its constituent parts and arranged in terms of their logical priority. In actual practice they are not so easy to sort out. Any given utterance can be viewed in terms of rhetorical aim and strategy, argumentative structure, theological content, spatial and temporal loci, appeal to motives, and implied relation between speaker, listener, and message. However, no theory or conceptual structure can furnish the art and imagination required to mold it all together in effective expression. That he was able to do so with such consistency over so

widely varied an authorship is the measure of Kierkegaard's stature as an artist.

The crucial element, however, is neither theory nor art. Where discourse aims to follow and nurture the inward processes of the listener's encounter with Christianity, all depends on the speaker's ability to replicate those processes in himself or herself. Kierkegaard saw his authorship as his own education in Christianity. In this sense, preaching or writing discourses is but a special form of every Christian's struggle with faith.

Judged solely by the standards Kierkegaard set for himself, it is difficult to fault his rhetoric. Although he has varying degrees of success in literary execution, there is a remarkable consistency both among the elements of his theory and in its employment in the discourses. Even his wildest self-contradictions can often be reconciled if we attend not to their semantic content alone, but to their rhetorical aim. If his purpose was to devise a theory of rhetoric that was uniquely suited to the communication of Christianity as he understood it, then it must be concluded that he succeeded admirably.

#### SOME PROBLEMS IN KIERKEGAARD'S RHETORIC

Because of this coherence between Kierkegaard's theology and his rhetoric, the problems we find with his rhetoric are inseparable from his version of Christianity. There are of course some extrinsic problems that limit Kierkegaard's applicability to contemporary

preaching. The literary style of his discourses reflects the pace and density typical of nineteenth century prose, and is moreover difficult to adapt to oral presentation. The revolution in homiletics in response to historical criticism of the Bible is barely on the horizon of Kierkegaard's concerns. He did raise the quantitative/qualitative distinction as a critical principle and often showed considerable exegetical skill, but his approach to scripture was largely within the pietistic tradition of devotional reading. In these matters we can hardly fault Kierkegaard for being a creature of his century.

Of greater concern is the adequacy of several of his basic theological concepts. There are two areas that I believe produce serious weaknesses in his rhetoric: ecclesiology, especially regarding the relationship of the individual to the Christian community, and christology. Most of my criticisms here are well-known from the literature on Kierkegaard, but it is nonetheless important to point out their consequences for preaching.

In fairness to Kierkegaard, we again need to add a note of caution. Having pulled together a coherent rhetorical theory from scattered comments in the journals and published works, we should not overlook the polemical aspects of the theory itself. Since Kierkegaard did not write a general treatise on Christian rhetoric, we have to assume that his rhetoric partly reflects the peculiarities of his calling as a troubler of Christendom. Because of this situational aspect it is nearly impossible clearly to distinguish inherent limitations in the theory from elements that are merely suppressed for

polemical reasons. Kierkegaard's apparent lack of a sense for the communal aspects of Christianity is a case in point. One can find ample reflections in the journals on which to base a "positive" ecclesiology that are nowhere apparent in the discourses. Kierkegaard's attack on the mob mentality of Christendom left little place for singing the joys of Christian community.

The other side of the problem, however, is that Kierkegaard did expect his concept of communication to be a major part of his intellectual bequest. That prediction has not yet proven true, at least among preachers, who are after all the main communicators of Christianity. To make use of Kierkegaard's rhetoric, we have to face its limitations squarely, whatever their source. He knew he needed a "corrective," and supplying one is the condition of receiving our inheritance from him.

The ecclesiological problem is perhaps an inevitable consequence of Kierkegaard's focus on the individual. The common criticism is that he was so intent on asserting the individual over against the "mass of mimickers" that he skirted solipsism. As Louis Mackey puts it, "his fear of coalescence, and his will to preserve freedom untrammelled led him to sweep away all order, participation, and community."<sup>3</sup> Richard H. Popkin points out the consequences for the doctrine of the church, suggesting that Kierkegaard's individualism leads to "an anarchy of

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<sup>3</sup> Louis Mackey, "The Loss of the World in Kierkegaard's Ethics," in Josiah Thompson, ed., Kierkegaard (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972), p. 279.



private individual faiths that cannot be discussed or communicated . . . And each believer has been cut off from all others. Each stands isolated on what he personally believes to be the Rock of Faith."<sup>4</sup> The warrants for these judgments have been profusely documented from Kierkegaard's authorship. More scarce but still apparent, especially in the journals, are countervailing statements that could be used in Kierkegaard's defense. If we are not to play the game of quoting Kierkegaard against Kierkegaard, we will do better to look in his overall anthropological/dialectical structure for the root of the problem. There it appears that an essential dialectical term has been consistently repressed: community.

At the ethical stage of human development Kierkegaard recognizes a dialectic between the individual and society. He has Judge Wilhelm speak on behalf of "a civil, a social self," in which the needs and desires of the individual are integrated with those of society. Kierkegaard later showed the darker side of this social self in The Present Age, his most concise treatment of the psychology of the crowd. Here he portrays a process in which, instead of reaching fulfillment in the God relationship, the personality is "leveled down" into the crowd. The crowd becomes "a negative representation of humanity,"<sup>5</sup> with envy as the negative force of cohesion. For Kierkegaard the church in Christendom is the primary exemplar of this mob mentality. Spiritually

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<sup>4</sup> Richard H. Popkin, "Kierkegaard and Scepticism," in Thompson, p. 372.

<sup>5</sup> PA, p. 55.

weak individuals band together to insulate themselves from Christianity and to buy off its ministers. They conspire to eliminate offense and smooth over difficulties and dissent. In short, they turn Christianity into a tool of conformity and social control.

As we have seen, Kierkegaard's rhetoric is ably directed toward breaking up the crowd to reach the resources of individuality. The broad shape of his argument was to place the individual in the middle of a struggle between the crowd and the God-relationship. He saw that unless a person achieves the individuation of faith at the religious stage, the dialectical tension between spirit and world collapses as he or she is absorbed into the crowd. (The resistance to such absorption is the element of truth in the aesthete's position.)

The problem is that in Kierkegaard's account of the religious stage, the dialectic tends to collapse in the opposite direction: the world and the realm of social relations constantly recede in order to leave the individual alone before God. So intent is Kierkegaard on cultivating inwardness that all other relationships are treated as instrumental to that end. We are directed either to reflect ourselves out of their influence or to use them as a medium for expressing and testing the God-relationship. A central theme of Works of Love, for example, is that Christianity "makes your every relationship to human beings into a God-relationship."<sup>6</sup> I find no problem here if this means that we are to love others as God has loved us, but in Kierkegaard's

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<sup>6</sup> WL, p. 345.

rhetorical treatment, the other human being tends to fade into a cipher for the God-relationship. It is difficult to avoid Stanley Moore's impression that Kierkegaard "seems much more interested in the virtue love than in the beings to be loved."<sup>7</sup> The problem is similar to one in a well-worn pulpit joke. A little girl responds to her Sunday School lesson on altruism: "If we are here to serve others, what are the others here for?"

Regarding ecclesiology, we have to ask what the Church is "for" in Kierkegaard's thought. With his focus on the individual's inwardness Kierkegaard is in danger of reducing the Church itself to a mere "concession":

Christianity teaches also that eternal life is simply not social. Society cannot be deduced from "spirit", and the Church exists precisely because we are not truly spirit or pure spirit. "The congregation" is an accommodation, a concession in view of how little we are able to endure being spirit.<sup>8</sup>

The difficulty here is not simply in Kierkegaard's pessimism, but that in view of the biblical testimony, he is quite wrong about what "Christianity teaches." Many of the fundamental biblical images for Christian identity—Kingdom of God, the Great Banquet, the Communion of Saints, the Body of Christ—are undeniably social. Yet Kierkegaard has consistently repressed the positive social elements of nurture, fellowship, mutual edification and correction—in short, he has suppressed the concept of the community. If "New Testament

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<sup>7</sup> Stanley Moore, "Religion as the True Humanism," Journal of the American Academy of Religion, 37 (March 1969), 16.

<sup>8</sup> JP IV, #4341.

Christianity" is the standard, then by his methodical elimination of the communal aspect of Christianity Kierkegaard seems to have done precisely what he wanted to avoid: distorting Christianity by the method of communicating it.

Of course Kierkegaard has a ready reply to this criticism. He felt that the mob-mentality of Christendom was unable to distinguish between community and a crowd; there first had to be individuals. "Christendom," he might say, "suffers from a self-induced astigmatism. I had to supply a rhetorical prescription in the form of a corresponding distortion before my listeners could see straight." For this there is no refutation, other than to say that different eyes need different spectacles. An adequate theory of Christian rhetoric needs to cover the full range of the Christian life, and for this Kierkegaard's attenuated view of the Church will not suffice. The question now is whether the rhetorical structure Kierkegaard has built up is limited to the service of his polemic, or whether it is capable of elaboration to include Christian community as an essential rhetorical term. We have to fill the slot in Kierkegaard's dialectical structure that was vacated by Christendom.

One of the principles of Kierkegaard's dialectic is repetition. Whenever a person enters a new stage, the self-understanding goes back over previous elements in the synthesis and re-integrates them from the new perspective. He also calls it a "second immediacy," i.e., a new way of perceiving and relating to the world. The ecclesiological problem is

to discover the second immediacy in a social sense, in the dialectic of self and community.

Although he did not develop them in his rhetoric, Kierkegaard left a few directions here, as if to demonstrate that he knew what ought to come next in the dialectic. "An authentic doctrine of the Church," he wrote, should chart the relations between individual and community.<sup>9</sup> His own formula is that "it is not the individual's relationship to the congregation which determines his relationship to God, but his relationship to God which determines his relationship to the congregation."<sup>10</sup> This is a consistent expression of the qualitative dialectic; the terms "God" and "congregation" are related to the individual by subordinating one to the other. Most church polities are in formal agreement with this position in that membership in a Christian community is founded on a prior confession of faith.

Here Kierkegaard lets the matter drop, convinced that in Christendom he was dealing with a crowd and not a congregation. To complete the dialectical structure we need to go back over the "social" term from the viewpoint of the religious stage and clarify the differences between a crowd and a community.

In Kierkegaard's categories, the members of a crowd are related by "accidental" factors: circumstances of birth, class and social status, political exigencies, even chance occurrences on the street. They are governed by the interplay of power relationships, social

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<sup>9</sup> JP II, #1970.

<sup>10</sup> Papirer X<sup>5</sup>, B208, cited by Lowrie in WL, p. 357.

conventions, and perceived self-interest. A community could be defined by contrast as a group in which the relating factors are "essential", e.g., consciously chosen commitments that are determinative of the individual's self-understanding and shared in common by the members of the group.

Perhaps Kierkegaard would have no quarrel with such a distinction. However, to paraphrase his definition of the self, such a collection of individuals is not yet a community. Common commitments do not in themselves form community; the commitments must somehow entail a relationship to other members, a relationship which is constitutive of the commitment itself. The traditional image of the Church as the Body of Christ expresses such a relationship. Here the individuation effected by a relationship to God is by its nature also an integration into a nexus of relationships to other persons "in Christ." According to the metaphor of the body, Christians need each other just as the hand needs the arm. To be a solitary Christian in the strictest sense is to be an amputee from the Body of Christ.

This Pauline image expresses a dialectic of individual and community. To be an individual is to be in a relationship of differentiated participation in a community. Even in the God-relationship we do not escape our finitude, and part of that finitude is the need of other selves in order to become a self, for other Christians in order to become a Christian. Trying to do without is the "despair of infinity." Conversely, the individuation of each

member is essential to the health of the community; each "cell" of the body has to be alive in the God-relationship.

In light of this corporate aspect of Christianity perhaps we can re-write Kierkegaard's formula for the healthy self to describe the healthy community: "by relating to one another and by willing to be themselves, the community is grounded transparently in the Power which posited it." The last clause is essential, for if we follow the biblical tradition, God "posited" not just the lonely Adam but the covenant community. As it stands, this is admittedly little more than a play on words, but it does give some indication of how we might fill the hole Kierkegaard left in his dialectical structure.

If we include community as a dialectical term, we get the following ratio:

$$\frac{\text{community/individual}}{\text{crowd/specimen}}$$

The terms are related horizontally as both/and, and vertically as either/or. Substituting theological terms, the social dimension could be rendered as "Body of Christ," "Kingdom of God," "Covenant Community," etc., versus "powers and principalities," "Babylon," "Caesar," or "Christendom." The terms for personality would pit "new life in Christ," "Christian freedom," faith and discipleship, against "the old man," the first Adam, bondage to sin, and idolatry. The pairs are also related diagonally, e.g., the individual witnessing against the idolatry of the crowd, and the "specimen man" overcoming alienation and despair by membership in the Christian community. The dialectical structure is

thus capable of elaboration into rhetorical strategies depending on the needs of the subject and the rhetorical situation.

With this adjustment to the Kierkegaardian structure, I believe we have the foundation for a rhetoric that is no longer limited to Kierkegaard's polemic, but capable of generating the rhetorical strategies demanded by an adequate ecclesiology. Appropriate strategies would include nurturing mutual communication within the community, including both mutual edification and criticism, techniques of identification and solidarity, and strategies for joint action and reflection. Here we need to be cautious that in trying to improve on Kierkegaard we don't slide back into Christendom. Talk of Christian community is often more expressive of a wish than a reality. Most congregations today exhibit some characteristics of both a crowd and a community; most members are somewhere between "specimen men" and individuals. Kierkegaard frankly treated the Church as a crowd, and asserted one half of the dialectic against it. If we now assert the other half by a thoughtless and wishful emphasis on community, we will have learned nothing from him. In a dialectical structure the suppression of a relevant contrasting point of view amounts to an error. As always in dialectic the point is to maintain the tension between the essential terms, for that is where its power lies, both as a tool of thought and a means of persuasion.

The problem of christology comes to the fore in Kierkegaard's later discourses, and in a sense that is what his work has been building toward—the existential choice of faith or offense before the paradox of



the God-man, the absolute demands of Christianity strained to the highest pitch in imitation of Christ. Training in Christianity is the focal point of this literature, and it is there we must look for the roots of the problem that Kierkegaard's christology poses for Christian rhetoric. And it is the rhetorical problem that concerns us in this study. Certainly one of the major intentions of Training in Christianity is to define the conditions under which a person can develop an authentic relationship to Christ. The corresponding problem for preaching is how these conditions can be communicated, and, at least in my reading of the later discourses on Christ, Kierkegaard falls short of the conditions he has set for himself.

There are three central themes in Training: contemporaneity, offense, and imitation, each drawn in relation to the paradox of the Incarnation. Together they constitute Kierkegaard's schema for developing a relationship to Christ: an existential meeting which poses the question of faith or offense, and if faith is chosen, a deepening and appropriation of the relationship to Christ through imitation. Contemporaneity is the necessary precondition for any encounter with Christianity, with the God-man, for the Incarnation is not a concept or a doctrine, but an event. It is the actuality of the Christ and an existential encounter with him that is decisive. Kierkegaard further insists that we may not jump past the man Jesus and begin with the Easter faith; it is Jesus "in His humiliation" whom we must meet. Yet how does one bridge the eighteen or the twenty centuries since this man lived? Jesus can only be present because He is also the risen and

ascended Christ. A standard theological answer is that they are one and the same, Jesus Christ. Kierkegaard's notion of contemporaneity, however, rests on making a distinction here, and this presents him with a rhetorical problem in his presentation of Christ. Since this problem is bound up with the concepts discussed below, we will return to it later.

Contemporaneity with a man who claims to be God brings with it the possibility of offense, which as we have seen takes three forms. The first is the offense to the established order, the sort of offense anyone arouses by violating social distinctions and religious custom. For Kierkegaard this is not the essential offense, since it does not have to do with the Incarnation. True offense comes only with a confrontation with Jesus' claim to be God. This in turn takes the form of either the offense at highness, that a mere man should claim divinity, or the offense at lowliness, that God should take the form of this lowly and despised man. This offense is the sign that the real issue has been joined, and faith is thus a possibility.

By setting up the problem in this way Kierkegaard does a lot to pare away the accretions of 1800 years of piety and a false reliance on previous generations of believers, as well as a pernicious confusion between doctrine and actuality. He argues that unless the decision for faith comes out of an encounter with Jesus in his historical reality, our faith is not in Jesus, but in the fact that others have believed in him, and faith thus becomes indistinguishable from the other opinions we absorb from our culture. Or, if our faith is in a doctrine about

Christ, it is carried off into the realm of knowledge to be speculated on and thought about rather than enacted. Or, if our faith is based on the consequences of Jesus' life we either treat him morally as utilitarian or as the winner of an historical popularity contest. In each case we find the unique and authoritative character of Jesus being absorbed and assimilated to strictly human standards. Kierkegaard argues that to avoid these consequences it is necessary to come into the relationship of contemporaneity and to pass through the offense.

The rhetorical problem here is how to enable contemporaneity with Jesus of Nazareth so that the familiar question can be raised with proper seriousness: "Who do you say that I am?" The problems that I find with Kierkegaard's rhetorical approach have to do with both the "how" and the "who," that is, with his treatment of the relationship between contemporaneity and history, and with his presentation of the identity of Jesus. Regarding the latter question Paul Sponheim notes that there is in Kierkegaard's presentation of the Christ "a tendency towards a rather static juxtaposition of the divine and the human, rather than a living internal meeting."<sup>11</sup> Of Kierkegaard's treatment of history, Sponheim further concludes that although his christological statements "never relinquish this emphasis on the event . . . they surely do fail to relate that event intelligibly to the common course of history."<sup>12</sup> Sponheim traces the problem to the dominance of the

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<sup>11</sup> Paul Sponheim, Kierkegaard on Christ and Christian Coherence (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 177.

<sup>12</sup> Sponheim, p. 298.

"diastatic" in Kierkegaard's christology, and from our study of Kierkegaard's dialectic we can perhaps break the issue down one step further: Kierkegaard suppresses the role of the quantitative dialectic (in this case the historical) in favor of the qualitative dialectic, and within the qualitative dialectic, he consistently stresses the dissociative over the associative mode. As we shall see in a moment, this is the case even in his treatment of imitation, where we would expect the associative to come to the fore.

At the beginning of Training in Christianity Kierkegaard poses the question, much as he did in the Fragments and the Postscript, "Can one learn from history anything about Christ?" Speaking here of "secular" history and the Christ of faith, he of course answers:

No. Why not? Because one can 'know' nothing at all about 'Christ'; He is the paradox, the object of faith, existing only for faith. But all historical communication is communication of 'knowledge,' hence from history one can learn nothing about Christ.<sup>13</sup>

As applying to Him, we have only sacred history (qualitatively different from history in general), which recounts the story of His life under the conditions of His humiliation, and reports moreover that He himself said that He was God.<sup>14</sup>

To appreciate Kierkegaard's argument here it is necessary to note that the idea of history to which he refers in the first citation is related to his rejection of historical consequences as a "proof" of the truth of Christianity. Christianity is not an Hegelian Idea which unfolds in a necessary progression in history and can therefore be

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<sup>13</sup> TC, p. 28.

<sup>14</sup> TC, p. 33.

understood by reflection on its development subsequent to the life of Jesus. Regarding faith, one generation cannot take up where the other left off, but each has to start from scratch with a primary relationship to Christ. In that sense there is no Christian history.

But there is another sense of the historical that does have a proper role in the Christian understanding. According to this use of history, it is understood less as a form of knowledge than as a form of interpretation. It is one means by which we try to understand what is "going on" in a situation, especially with reference to the interplay of political, economic, and social factors, and to the conceptual categories of the period in question. It forms the "objective" framework by which we approach contemporaneity with Jesus of Nazareth, or with any other historical figure. The subjective task is then to place oneself existentially within this interpretive context.

In his zeal for cutting off the misuses of history in the first sense, Kierkegaard has also foreshortened the role of history in the second. According to Kierkegaard's dialectical distinctions, we would expect to find the historical dialectic being employed to clarify and define the uncertainties faith confronts in the biblical accounts of Jesus. There would then be a dialectic between objective uncertainty (the Jesus of secular history) and passionate subjective appropriation (the Christ of faith). Instead, he cuts off historical inquiry virtually from the beginning by placing all matters concerning Jesus under the "qualitatively different" category of sacred history. As he had done with the problem of inspiration in the Postscript, Kierkegaard

condenses an ongoing dialogue between the quantitative and the qualitative into a single issue. Either you treat Jesus much as you would Napoleon and pick among the stories handed down in search of the closest approximation to what actually happened, or you take the Gospel accounts at face value and choose faith or offense.

There is a contradiction here that flaws Kierkegaard's presentation of Jesus in Training in Christianity. The essential factor in gaining contemporaneity is that the medium of presentation cannot presuppose faith, e.g., it cannot be based on a prior decision that Jesus was the Christ. And yet in order to posit a qualitative distinction between secular and sacred history, that decision must already be made. The sacred history of the Gospels is only sacred if one believes the Jesus they proclaim to be the Christ. Kierkegaard, however, wants to make sacred history the medium for a pre-Christian confrontation with Jesus, and this is a contradiction that he never escapes. The most he achieves is to change the focus of Christian piety from the risen and ascended Christ to his earthly life (see especially the third part of Training, where he constantly inverts the interpretive locus of "From on High He will Draw All to Himself"), and this has significance for imitation. But it does not solve the root problem of how we can suspend our faith that Jesus is the Christ in order to reclaim it in contemporaneity, when that faith is already enclosed within the boundaries of sacred history. Contemporaneity requires, in effect, that we approach Jesus as unbelievers, and the corollary to that regarding history is that we employ the quantitative dialectic of

secular history in order to define the limits and uncertainties that faith must confront.

One of these uncertainties is surely the question of Jesus' Messianic consciousness. It is only by closing off the historical dialectic at the boundary of sacred history that Kierkegaard can make the bald assertion that Jesus claimed to be God. Even with a literal reading of the Gospels it is only the Gospel of John that can be made to support that claim. Kierkegaard takes little account of the many christological titles that stop short of a straightforward identification of Jesus with God—Son of Man, Son of God, Lord, Messiah, Christ—nor does he consider the problem of which titles Jesus applied to himself and which were applied to him by later believers. These questions have continued to trouble biblical scholarship, and Kierkegaard's ideas of contemporaneity and offense help us to see why they are so important. Yet Kierkegaard himself writes as if they had already been answered. In place of the difficult question of Jesus' self-understanding versus the confessional responses of his followers, Kierkegaard simply asserts Jesus' divinity.

I suspect that the reasons for this strategy are, first, that he believed it, and second, that he wanted to pose the subjective problem of contemporaneity without getting bogged down in historical "quibbling." To do so he sought vivid and distinct characterizations of Jesus and his contemporaries rather than to elucidate a complex web of historical uncertainties and approximations. In claiming that Kierkegaard suppresses the historical dialectic, I am not therefore

suggesting that he slights the historical reality of Jesus. Indeed, he gives dozens of portraits of Jesus, scenes from his life, telling again and again the story of his birth to humble parents, the first shallow attraction of the masses, followed by their repudiation and persecution of him. Again and again we are told to look upon this pitiable figure, humiliated, despised, mocked, derided, and spat upon.

And yet, after repeated readings, it is still difficult to find a credible account of what Kierkegaard's Jesus could have done to arouse such vile opposition. These scenes are like excerpts from a story that we cannot interpret because we don't know what has gone before. They lack sufficient reference to their historical context or to the mission and teachings of Jesus, perhaps because for Kierkegaard, Jesus' sole mission is himself; the teacher is the teaching. The "established order" is therefore left with no other motive for killing Jesus than that he is too heterogeneous with it, that he claims to be God. Kierkegaard's Denmark cannot be imagined (except possibly by Kierkegaard) to execute a man on this account, yet he gives no indication of why first century Palestinians would. In the absence of convincing motives for this persecution, Kierkegaard's Jesus is just too pathetic and his opponents too beastly to enable an identification with the historical scenes Kierkegaard portrays. One is reminded more of Kierkegaard's own self-pitying responses to the Corsair affair than of anything in the Gospels. No matter how vividly he portrays scenes from Jesus' life, the nature of the historical context in which they occur remains vaguely drawn and poorly distinguished from nineteenth century



sensibilities. For contemporaneity to succeed as a rhetorical category, the listener has to have confidence that there is a substantial congruence between the imaginative construct of the speaker and the historical reality to which it refers. Kierkegaard's Jesus is too assimilated to his own conflict with Danish Christendom; there is too much confusion between Jesus of Nazareth and Kierkegaard of Copenhagen to make contemporaneity possible.

Kierkegaard's presentation of Jesus' identity exclusively in light of the Incarnation presents further problems. Although Training in Christianity contains extensive scenes from the life of Jesus, they are selected and presented in such a way as always to call attention to his claim to be God: "He would direct the attention of all to Himself."<sup>15</sup> Jesus' poverty is portrayed less as his commitment to the poor than as an aspect of his disguise, and in this sense Kierkegaard holds that it is a matter of indifference whether Christ is a poor man or an emperor.<sup>16</sup> Likewise his suffering is not essentially related to his conflict with "the established order," but is a consequence of the fact that incarnation cannot be directly communicated.<sup>17</sup> "His life as a whole is the suffering of inwardness"<sup>18</sup> and the outward persecution is only secondary. In all of this the focus is held consistently to the sheer fact of the Incarnation.

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<sup>15</sup> JFY, p. 180.

<sup>16</sup> TC, p. 43. Cf. CUP, pp. 527-28.

<sup>17</sup> TC, p. 136.

<sup>18</sup> TC, p. 138.

But what sort of Incarnation does Kierkegaard envision? Here the dissociative or "diastatic" mode of presentation dominates. The nature of Christ is that he is the Paradox, in which the opposites of God and humanity are "held apart from one another in such frightful tension."<sup>19</sup> The God-man is a sign, Kierkegaard says, but what is signified? The depth of God's love for suffering humanity? Perhaps, but what Kierkegaard chooses to bring forward is that he is a sign of . . . the Incarnation, a "sign of contradiction." The whole shape of Kierkegaard's argument had been to swing away from all reference to human values and human history to draw our attention to a single point at which God intersects the world like a line tangent to a circle.<sup>20</sup> Yet in Kierkegaard's presentation this intersection threatens to become, like a mathematical point, without content. It is of little help to argue as does N. H. Soe that the content is given by the fact that Kierkegaard adds that Christ came "in order to suffer."<sup>21</sup> For Kierkegaard, Christ suffers on account of the incognito of the Incarnation. This is circular, and still without content.

One apparent exception to this trend in Kierkegaard's thought is his emphasis on Christ taking the form of a servant. In one sense the servant form is an incognito, i.e. in view of the essential exaltation of his divinity, but in another sense it is his true identity. He came

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<sup>19</sup> JFY, pp. 173-74.

<sup>20</sup> JFY, p. 178.

<sup>21</sup> N. H. Soe, "Kierkegaard's Doctrine of the Paradox," in Howard A. Johnson and Niels Thulstrup, eds., A Kierkegaard Critique (Chicago: Regnery, 1962), p. 211.

in order to serve. His lowliness is a genuine expression of divine compassion: "To make oneself literally one with the most miserable" is true Godly compassion.<sup>22</sup> Yet on closer reading, the nature of Christ's service is carefully dissociated from any human notion of what it is to be helped. Christ's solidarity with the poor is not interpreted as having any material or political consequences; it is simply an expression of the divine equality of concern for everyone. And the service Christ provides is likewise strictly spiritual. He "bids the poor, the sick, the suffering to come to him," but he is "able to do nothing for them but only to promise them forgiveness of sins."<sup>23</sup> As regards the worldly order that brings this suffering upon the poor, his attitude is one of "Infinite indifference."<sup>24</sup> Thus even in his presentation of the servanthood of Christ, Kierkegaard consistently emphasizes the absolute heterogeneity of the divine and the human rather than their union in Christ.

One could perhaps construct a theological defense of Kierkegaard at this point, but from the standpoint of rhetoric we have to ask not what is possible but what is achieved of Kierkegaard's rhetorical aim. And here it seems that Kierkegaard has scored a logical point about the priority of faith in the Incarnation at the expense of enabling a meaningful encounter with it. By limiting the life and work of Jesus to a confrontation with the Incarnation, Kierkegaard has drained them of

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<sup>22</sup> TC, p. 63.

<sup>23</sup> TC, p. 64.

<sup>24</sup> TC, p. 169.

any connection either with "the common course of history" or with any meaningful sense of sacred history. Kierkegaard writes not as if Christ were the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel or the beginning of a new possibility in human history, but simply a luminous interruption, rather like a theophany. His Christ is like an incognito Burning Bush, revealing little more than the sheer presence of God.

The consequence of this extreme dissociation is to undercut the effectiveness of Kierkegaard's category of imitation. Within his overall rhetorical scheme, imitation has two major functions. It stands over against grace as "the requirement," so that grace will not be taken in vain, so that in face of the ideals a person will be driven to grace. This function is Kierkegaard's self-conscious dialectical response to Luther.<sup>25</sup> The other function is an application of the existential dialectic to the appropriation of Christianity; one comes to understand one's faith and one's self by acting in accordance with it. Valter Lindstrom expresses the common feature of these two functions by noting that imitation is for Kierkegaard neither an ethical ideal nor "a definite mode of life" but the cultivation of a personal relationship with Christ as Redeemer and Pattern.<sup>26</sup>

The question is whether the Christ Kierkegaard presents can effectively serve as a pattern. Any decision to follow Christ has to ask where Christ is going, and the God-man of Training in Christianity

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<sup>25</sup> JP II, #1852, #1857.

<sup>26</sup> Valter Lindstrom, "The Problem of Objectivity and Subjectivity in Kierkegaard," in Johnson and Thulstrup, p. 240.

offers us few clues. The images Kierkegaard employs are consistently dissociative: suffering, renunciation, dying to the world. The nearest he gets to linking these terms to specific actions is to suggest voluntary poverty, celibacy, and to submit oneself to scorn and derision in order to witness to the truth or "to suffer for the doctrine." The content he gives to the concept of imitation is almost entirely in the form of negation, so much so that his logic carries him to the conclusion that the true witness is the martyr. But what is there in Kierkegaard's concept of imitation to provoke martyrdom? Although thousands have died for opposing the rich, people are rarely killed for accepting poverty. And even when Kierkegaard finally urges a break with the established order it does not appear that he ever intended to change it or to set up another in its place. The problem in sum is that although Kierkegaard's treatment of imitation may show us what we must renounce, it fails to show us what way of life we must embrace. And this I believe is because he consistently presents the Christ we are to imitate as infinitely distant from our human nature rather than as the fulfillment of it.

In the later discourses Kierkegaard's Christ is finally so heterogeneous with the world that he can neither serve as the pattern for a way of life nor can he occasion the kind of conflict that is necessary for faith. There can be no conflict with the wholly other. As in his parable of the two men eating nuts, where one liked the meats and the other the shells, there is not a collision but a perverse harmony when the relation between God and the world is so conceived. It

is not surprising that Training in Christianity failed to provoke the response Kierkegaard expected; he subverted it himself.

To make a conflict possible it would be necessary to restore the suppressed elements of Kierkegaard's dialectic: the quantitative dialectic of secular history, especially regarding Jesus' place within the political and economic conflicts of his time, and within the qualitative dialectic, the associative pole, which links the confrontation with Jesus to a very specific life situation and a related ethical decision. Were we to do so we might find that the distinction between types of offense no longer holds, at least not as Kierkegaard has formulated it. The offense to the established order is not for Kierkegaard the essentially Christian offense because it does not directly raise the question of Jesus' divinity. Anyone with sufficient moral courage could do it. But if Jesus is the Christ, then his conflict with the established order is not just that of a social agitator; it carries moral authority. It is an essentially Christian conflict because it is Christ's conflict. Then the historical setting takes on new importance because it is needed in order to interpret the nature of the conflict. Therefore suppose we approach offense in another way, by asking at the same time if this is the God-man who runs up against the religious/political/economic order of Israel. Then we have to answer for what sort of God we are believing in if we believe in Jesus Christ. If it is God's opposition to the established order we are facing, then the decision about the identity of Jesus immediately becomes both a religious and a political question.

To separate these questions is to leave a gap for precisely the kind of evasions and misappropriations Kierkegaard otherwise sought to prevent. As John Nijenhuis puts it, "Christology without Jesus of Nazareth is Ideology."<sup>27</sup> The consequences of such a separation can presently be seen in the way in which an ahistorical Christ-as-personal-savior is used to buttress the ideology of the religious right. This is hardly congenial with Kierkegaard's intentions, but it must be admitted that there is little in his presentation of Christ to prevent it. By contrast, it has become a commonplace in the rhetoric of theologies of liberation to portray Christ quite explicitly among those suffering political and economic oppression, and especially among those who knowingly and without compulsion take their stand among the poor and oppressed, and suffer for it. Perhaps had he seen the re-emergence of martyrdom as we have in the twentieth century, he would have seen this other side to the imitation of Christ.

As it stands, Kierkegaard's powerful rhetorical apparatus for inducing action in his listeners fails him in the later discourses because his tenacity for the "infinite qualitative distance" between humanity and God leaves him with no meaningful context for action. Kierkegaard's own tenacious conservatism is a case in point. While he allowed his view of the established order to be relativized by Christianity, he never allowed it to be transformed to a new vision of

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<sup>27</sup> John Nijenhuis, "Christology without Jesus of Nazareth is Ideology," in Leonard Swidler, ed., Consensus in Theology? (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), pp. 125-140.

political, economic, and social life—just as he never brought forth a new vision of the Church from his critique of Christendom. Contrary to Kierkegaard's concern for cutting off evasions, this gap leaves a place for smuggling in ideology in place of Christian ethics. That we can nonetheless turn to Kierkegaard's rhetorical structure for clues on how the problem may be overcome is once again evidence that his Christian rhetoric is more durable than his execution of it.

#### THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE STUDY TO KIERKEGAARD SCHOLARSHIP

The Kierkegaard scholar is likely to find little in this study that is new to him or her, and much that is already well-worn dressed in the strange costume of rhetoric. It has not been my intention to attempt any radical revisions in our understanding of him. Instead, I have had the more practical intention of exploring Kierkegaard's possible contributions to the field of homiletics. Preachers have felt the sting of his criticism perhaps more than any other segment of Christianity, and it is only fair that they should also receive their benefits from him. Furthermore, since the nature of Kierkegaard's contribution is in some sense systematic, it has been necessary to give a much broader scope to this study than would ordinarily be permissible in a dissertation. For both reasons the study is likely to be of less interest to Kierkegaard specialists than to homileticians and students of rhetoric.

The one mitigating factor is that there is so much in Kierkegaard's work that invites rhetorical criticism. In applying the



tools of that discipline to a major segment of Kierkegaard's authorship I have risked taking him seriously on two points: that his primary intention was as a religious author, and that to serve this end he constructed and employed a Christian rhetoric on the basis of a transformation of Aristotelian categories. If this study makes any contribution to Kierkegaard scholarship it is in advancing a point of view on Kierkegaard as rhetorician, a perspective which should take its place beside Kierkegaard the philosopher, psychologist, poet, and theologian. Anyone who has struggled to nail Kierkegaard down to a definite position will recognize the rhetorical element in virtually all his writings: he aims to make you struggle. To interpret Kierkegaard it is necessary constantly to discern what he is trying to do to the reader as an ingredient of what he means. Under these conditions rhetoric is a necessary viewpoint, not only in being edified by him, but simply in understanding him. Perhaps it need not be added that to let rhetoric become the only viewpoint is sophistry.

To some degree this perspective has long been recognized by readers and students of Kierkegaard. Those intent upon elucidating a Kierkegaardian "doctrine" find themselves in a debate with other scholars over the reading of particular passages as straightforwardly philosophical/theological, polemical or poetic. The Concluding Unscientific Postscript, for example, is taken partly as representative of Kierkegaard's own fundamental position and partly as the experimental and polemical work of a persona, Johannes Climacus. Having selected those statements deemed to reflect the "real" Kierkegaard, the scholar

supports them by further selections from the journals, and evaluates the results.<sup>28</sup> The aim of this method is to dig through the polemical and the poetic to find a conceptual core. For the philosophical or theological analysis of Kierkegaard, his rhetoric is chiefly an irritant.

Such research is indispensable to an understanding of Kierkegaard. His works are a thicket of interesting ideas that should be discussed and evaluated. Yet there are two problems with the conceptual approach that I believe are alleviated by proper attention to his rhetoric.

For one, the conceptual "core" is not always the most significant aspect of his work. Both the aesthetic works and the edifying discourses are marginal to philosophical-theological debate. As Louis Mackey put it, agreeing or disagreeing with many of them "makes about as much sense as agreeing or disagreeing with Hamlet."<sup>29</sup> As the aesthetic works suggest the priority of literary-critical interpretation, so do the edifying discourses invite rhetorical criticism. The discourses are not simply awkward vehicles for Kierkegaard's ideas, but a major body of devotional literature, and were clearly intended to be read as such. The reader who approaches Purity of Heart in the same manner as the Postscript is bound to be

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<sup>28</sup> For an excellent example of this approach see N. H. Soe, "Kierkegaard's Doctrine of the Paradox," in Johnson and Thulstrup, pp. 207-227.

<sup>29</sup> Louis Mackey, Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), p. x.

disappointed. Proper regard for the genre of each work or group of works is essential if we are to apply the appropriate critical tools and give the most fruitful reading of a particular text. At a minimum, then, the rhetorical analysis we have undertaken here should provide a critical framework for study of the religious discourses.

The second problem for conceptual analysis is that of finding a standard for judging Kierkegaard's intent in a given passage. The danger (which I have felt at every turn) is that the sympathetic reader will discount statements as poetic exaggeration or polemical extremes simply because they do not fit his/her interpretation of Kierkegaard. We want to agree with Kierkegaard so we say "He didn't really mean it." The equal danger is that the opponent of Kierkegaard will interpret a rhetorical ploy as a philosophical or theological claim. Neither approach applies a standard of judgment internal to Kierkegaard's work. If we assume that his elusiveness is due to haphazard obfuscation there is no alternative but to fall back on our own interests in reading Kierkegaard. But if we give some weight to Kierkegaard's own statements of his intentions, then all his works should be read, at least provisionally, as part of a coherent and developing rhetorical praxis. We would then look to his presuppositions about his audience, both motivational and conceptual, and evaluate his arguments not only for validity but also for their intended effect on the reader. Many students of Kierkegaard develop their own implicit understanding of his rhetoric, if only because they are forced to do so in order to

understand him. In this study I have simply tried to be more explicit and, if possible, systematic about it.

The limitations of rhetorical criticism of Kierkegaard should be acknowledged. Kierkegaard's rhetoric like his thought is emergent in his authorship. The Point of View is less the unveiling of a blueprint present from the beginning than Kierkegaard's own attempt to see the unity in his work. In the same respect the rhetorical structure we have outlined is pieced together from Kierkegaard's reflections on his rhetorical praxis and his preparations for future works. We should be wary, then, of seeing more unity in his work than is really there. Nor can we assume that Kierkegaard was always consistent in his rhetorical praxis, or that he always achieved his intentions. But we should at least look for the unity and intentionality that is there.

Finally, I would suggest that Kierkegaard's own purpose of edification is well served by rhetorical analysis. A standard of quality for any work of art is that our appreciation of it is enhanced by criticism, as poor art is diminished by it. It is my hope that the reader of Kierkegaard's discourses will find the rhetorical structure developed here to be an aid to edification.

## Chapter VII

## CONCLUDING PROSPECTUS

The problem with which this investigation began was the apparent lack of disciplinary coherence in the field of homiletics. We suggested that this absence showed itself in the traditionalist nature of homiletical training, and, in the literature, in a lack of theoretical or critical initiative and a consequent piecemeal borrowing from other disciplines. Most important, we suggested that this lack of disciplinary and methodological clarity resulted in styles of preaching that were often at odds with their own message. We hoped to find embedded in Kierkegaard's authorship, in what we have called his "Christian rhetoric," a paradigm that could help us find unity and clarity in the field of homiletics. It is in the nature of his authorship that the main task of this investigation has been to unearth Kierkegaard's own paradigm. We now need to see what use we can make of it.

Whether Kierkegaard's reflections on rhetoric can be called a "paradigm" depends on what we mean by the term. If we equate it with Kinneavy's phrase "a comprehensive system of the discipline,"<sup>1</sup> then the answer must be no. Although Kierkegaard had disciplinary considerations in mind (see especially the fragment from "Something about the Occasional Addresses of the Clergy," appended to Stages on Life's Way),

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<sup>1</sup> James L. Kinneavy, A Theory of Discourse (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971), p. 2.

he surely had no desire to found a "school" of Kierkegaardian homiletics. When faced with the decision whether to develop his ideas in a manner in which other homileticians could participate and contribute or to concentrate on his own praxis, he usually chose the latter course. If we now reverse Kierkegaard's decision, we will have to beware of the changes wrought in transposing his private methods into the sphere of a public discipline.

A similar concern applies to the notion of a rhetorical "system." Now that the term has lost its Hegelian connotations, perhaps there is no objection to calling Kierkegaard's rhetoric a "system," if we mean by that a comprehensive and internally consistent method of structuring Christian discourse. But in the stricter sense in which Kierkegaard used the term, we would have to apply his argument in the Postscript, that the conditions of which Christian rhetoric must take account do not form a system, at least not for the existing preacher. On the "receiving" end, rhetoric has to account for the unique characteristics of each audience. On the "producing" end, the demand for consistency between theological presuppositions and rhetorical form generates a multiplicity of rhetorics to match the diversity of theological viewpoints among Christian preachers. And even where there is a high degree of theological consensus, the ethos created by each preacher's character militates against a common system of prescriptive rhetoric.

If we think of a paradigm in a somewhat more restricted way, however, as a smaller scale model but with expanding implications, then

we may be justified in looking to Kierkegaard for a paradigm of homiletical studies. The embryonic or regenerative stages of any discipline tend to center around the set of problems defined by the work of its major innovators. The concerns and methods of an individual are divided and absorbed into a community of scholars and practitioners, but the presence of a systematic perspective, even if it is not the final word on the subject, serves as a focus and point of reference for the common work. It helps to show us where to look in our research, where to apply our methods, and where we need to develop them. Well over a century after his death, Kierkegaard's may not be the systematic perspective that we need, but at the least we can learn from him something of what we presently lack.

In appropriating Kierkegaard we will be best served if we do not treat his rhetoric statically, as a taxonomy of homiletical studies (e.g., treating dialogue sermons as an extension of Kierkegaardian dialectic). We could easily demonstrate a superficial "relevance" in this way, but to superimpose the Kierkegaardian structure onto contemporary homiletical studies would not make him "contemporaneous." It would merely give the appearance of greater coherence than is actually to be found. We cannot create a discipline by fiat.

However, if we take the dynamic alternative and apply the Kierkegaardian concern for consistency, theological implication, and dialectical clarity to the scattered parts of homiletical theory, we may see how it pushes us toward disciplinary coherence. In the comments that follow, then, I will not try to reiterate the structure of

Kierkegaard's rhetoric in modern dress, but will instead apply his method to several problems in contemporary homiletics. In the space remaining we can treat none of them thoroughly, but if we can show an impetus toward coherence among them, we will have done enough for the present. Except where expressly noted, I am not claiming Kierkegaard's support for the positions advanced here, only that my study of his rhetoric has raised these issues and has occasionally suggested a way out—admittedly not always the way he would have chosen.

#### COMMUNICATION AS A THEOLOGICAL PROBLEM: THE UNITY OF THEOLOGY AND RHETORICAL STRATEGY

First and last Kierkegaard would have us remember that there must be consistency and a constant correlation between our understanding of Christianity and our methods of preaching. His rhetoric is in many respects an intricate elaboration on the simple observation that form and content interact in communication. His understanding of their relationship brought him to a position equally compatible with the maxims of Frank Lloyd Wright that form follows function, and of Susanne Langer, that form embodies feeling and subjective states. We have tried to spell out in detail how Kierkegaard worked out this relationship in his rhetoric, but the point for homiletics remains the more general one, that unless we understand and control this basic interaction we cannot be said to know what we are doing when we preach.

Unfortunately, the role assigned to homiletics among the theological disciplines has long militated against a unity of theology and homiletical method. In James D. Smart's words,



Homiletics has far too often been considered merely practical training in the construction and delivery of sermons rather than a seriously theological discipline that focuses its critical attention upon how the whole theological enterprise and the whole life of the church comes to expression in preaching.<sup>2</sup>

Systematic theology, biblical studies, and church history have largely treated preaching as a sideline of their own inquiries, and homiletics has been left with strictly performative concerns.

As a result of this separation, the major resources for homiletics have largely been drawn from the experience of the seasoned pulpiteer, exemplary sermons, English composition, and from what remains of the tradition of preceptive rhetoric. It typically takes the form of advice, rules, and steps. So conceived, rhetorical strategies have the advantage of being easily transferred from one generation of preachers to the next. Among the liabilities of this tradition are that it is insensitive to context or to variations in theological perspective among preachers, and primarily that it has no inner logic to hold it all together. What I. A. Richards said of preceptive rhetoric applies equally well to preceptive homiletics: it is like alchemy; it tries to produce gold without an understanding of the internal structures of the elements.<sup>3</sup>

Our study of Kierkegaard should warn us away from viewing rhetorical strategies as an independent set of rules for effective communication. Rather they are generated "dialectically" from the

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<sup>2</sup> James D. Smart, The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970), p. 30.

<sup>3</sup> I. A. Richards, The Philosophy of Rhetoric (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), p. 9.

nature and aims of the communication and from our knowledge of the audience to which it is addressed. The Kierkegaardian perspective would give theology a role in homiletics analogous to that played by metarhetorical criticism in secular rhetoric. It would mean grounding our preaching in a theology of communication and in theological anthropology.

To put the issue as simply and as broadly as possible, there are at least three questions that a preacher needs to answer in order to be clear about his/her preaching: 1. How does God communicate with people? 2. What of Christianity can be communicated by one person to another? (And equally important, what cannot?) 3. What is the relationship of the preacher to that communication? Asking these questions immediately raises not only the issues of revelation, Word of God, and Holy Spirit, but also christology, ecclesiology, and doctrine of sin.

For Kierkegaard God's communication is between the Scriptures and the conscience, with the preacher serving a secondary function as prompter or midwife. A rather different role is assigned, for example, by Gerhard Ebeling, who ties God's Word to the sermon as an execution of the text, which is itself an interpretation of a prior occurrence of the "word-event."<sup>4</sup> Yet another role appears for those who see the text itself as God's word in a literal sense. If followed consistently, each position would produce a vastly different approach to preaching.

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<sup>4</sup> Gerhard Ebeling, "Word of God and Hermeneutic" in James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, eds., The New Hermeneutic (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 109.

I do not suggest that homiletics alone asks or can answer the questions outlined above, only that they are foundational to the discipline, and that they should serve as a focal point for our research. The answers we give or derive from related theological disciplines will be constitutive of how we preach.

There are clear implications here also for homiletical education. Except in situations where a homogeneous group has allegiance to an authoritative ecclesiastical body, it is not appropriate to teach a single approach to the theological foundations of preaching. The problem was brought home to me when I was assisting in an introductory preaching class. Aside from a presentation on the New Hermeneutic, the root theological issues had been taken for granted in a liberal spirit of collegiality. Midway through the semester the class was brought up short by a Hispanic evangelical. He had preached one sermon following the exegesis/application method that was being taught in the class. All agreed it was a miserable failure, and he considered dropping out. In discussing the problem with him, it became apparent that he was being asked to preach in a manner that violated his deepest convictions. Our emphasis on "responsibility to the text" left him feeling cut off from the Holy Spirit. I then encouraged him to forget everything we had said and try again (admittedly not without some reservations about what the Spirit would move him to say). He next preached on Luke 4.16 ff. He spoke of the hurt and rage he had felt growing up as the child of a migrant worker, following someone else's crops around the country and living in stables. He spoke of the promise

and the sense of worth he and his people came to feel in these words of Jesus. We who listened that day were moved to tears, but we were also moved to re-examine the theological foundations of our homiletics.

What I learned from Sr. Gomez is that there can be no more consensus in Christian rhetoric than there is in theology, since the former depends (or ought to) on the latter. A style of homiletical education that takes theological diversity seriously could not advocate a single method, but would "fan out" into a variety of methods to be appropriated by each student. The emphasis would be on developing clarity about our theologies of communication and exploring their rhetorical consequences. For homiletics the question is consistency of method with presuppositions, and, at least for educational purposes, this question has to be treated apart from the theological question as to the adequacy of the presuppositions themselves. Both forms of analysis are essential, but only when we observe their distinctions can we avoid confusing a theological difference with a rhetorical fallacy. And perhaps such an approach can help preachers discover the theological reefs lurking beneath the smooth surface of the homiletical tradition.

#### THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND AUDIENCE ANALYSIS

A theology of communication raises the issue of what sort of beings are doing the communicating. It would have to examine something like the set of questions we encountered in Kierkegaard's anthropology: the structure and development of selfhood, freedom, motive, sin, and the function of the God-relationship in the personality. And here again, as

soon as we look beyond Kierkegaard to the whole field of homiletics we find that different Christian anthropologies produce different rhetorics.

Consider the question of freedom of the will. The Augustinian/Pelagian debate has continued to surface over the centuries, and preaching has generally been at the center of it with regard to the kind of appeal that is theologically permissible to address to the listener. In America the struggle between Arminians and Calvinists produced in the work of Jonathan Edwards a Christian rhetoric that can stand with Kierkegaard's for its comprehensiveness and originality.

Edwards argued that the will resolves upon its strongest motive, and that we can consider any resolution to be free, and therefore responsible, if it is made without external constraints. He then developed an analysis of the motives and "religious affections" and a corresponding aesthetic rhetoric that aimed at drawing the listener by the attractive power of the beauty and love of God. His rhetoric was entirely consistent with his anthropology--and nearly a direct opposite of Kierkegaard's.

Whatever the diversity of theological anthropologies, they have a common function for homiletics. They should provide us with a conceptual framework for understanding our listeners and for finding means of expression that are both effective for them and theologically justifiable. A recurrent problem has been that effectiveness and theological legitimation are too easily divorced, the former being derived from the preacher's experience in the pulpit, and the latter

handed down from Christian doctrine. When the two collide, as they did in the 19th Century American debate over freedom of the will, it leads to the sort of confusion expressed in this folk-rhyme from the period:

You can and you can't,  
You will and you won't.  
You're damned if you do,  
And damned if you don't.

The Calvinists satirized in this jingle were maintaining that the will was utterly corrupt and incapable of good, while they preached as if their listeners could in fact make a decision "for Christ." This quandary is perhaps inevitable when theological content and rhetorical form do not share the same anthropological presuppositions.

Contemporary homiletical theory has as yet done little to prevent this kind of dilemma. There remains a gulf between theological anthropology and its rhetorical counterpart, audience analysis. Preachers are then left without a coherent method for understanding their listeners, save by a mixture of their own preconceptions about human nature, Christian doctrine, casual observation, and perhaps some reading in communications studies. And there is rarely an attempt to correlate theory with observation. The two sources of insight run parallel to one another, and in the event of a contradiction the pastor must overrule either theology or experience. Over the course of time the factor that is consistently overruled is more apt to wither than to be consciously revised. Carried to its conclusion this failure of method ends in Kierkegaardian irony: the preacher who has abandoned the message in order to communicate more effectively, or the preacher who

has abandoned communication in order to preserve the message "pure and unspotted from the world."

One reason Kierkegaard was able to escape this contradiction is that he perceived in Christianity not only the content of communication but the "how" of it and the "who." He believed that Christianity has explanatory power for understanding the nature of the audience—not that it supersedes the data of observation but that it has the resources for best interpreting it: "Christianity is still the only explanation of existence that holds water."<sup>5</sup> His journals combine theological and scriptural reflections with scenes from daily experience in a common project of "anthropological contemplation," each illuminating the other.

By keeping the observational and the theological poles of anthropology together Kierkegaard was able to generate categories that had direct implications for his rhetoric: the stages as a structure of motives and of religious development, offense, repetition, and reduplication. Whatever intrinsic value these categories may hold, of greatest importance for homiletics is what they show us of our need for a method.

Another viewpoint on our methodological problem comes from contemporary biblical hermeneutics. The guiding images of recent hermeneutical thought might be called "bipolar": building a bridge between one time and culture and another, fusion of horizons, dynamic analogy. They call attention to the "historicity" of understanding and

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<sup>5</sup> JP I, #1052.

to the fact that we cannot interpret the world of the Bible without interpreting our own at the same time. The scholarly apparatus of biblical exegesis has grown increasingly sophisticated, its methods and results are readily available to the preacher, and to that degree one foot of the hermeneutical bridge is firmly in place.

What is lacking is a corresponding hermeneutic of the contemporary context that would give the preacher the same kind of insight into his/her culture as into the biblical text. Perhaps this is one reason why the New Hermeneutic has often fallen flat in the pulpit. Without adequate analytical tools for understanding the present context of interpretation, biblical hermeneutics is building a bridge to nowhere.

This is not to belittle recent efforts at developing methods of cultural interpretation and audience analysis for preaching. Homileticians have been quick to draw on the resources of psychology, sociology, communications theory, and in the mission field, cultural anthropology. Perhaps we have not been as quick to digest these appropriations theologically, with the result that contemporary homiletical theory has a bad case of methodological indigestion. We may have missed some of the insights that could be gained if we kept our theological wits about us.

A look at some of the promise and the problems encountered in applying communications studies to preaching may clarify the issue. Edgar Jackson was among the first to apply social science research to homiletics. In one of his experiments he measured the difference in



audience response to two contrasting styles of preaching. One, which he called "repressive-inspirational," was modeled on the style of Norman Vincent Peale; it minimized conflicts, offered reassurance, and stressed the positive. The other style he called "analytical." It focused on a particular social problem or psychological conflict, stressed personal responsibility and brought to bear the prophetic side of the Gospel. Through trained observers and monitoring of audience response and requests for pastoral counseling, Jackson found that the analytical style was highly unpopular compared with the repressive-inspirational, but produced markedly greater pressure for personal change. As the experiment continued, attendance dropped off on the alternate weeks when he used the analytical style, but more people engaged him in discussion or sought pastoral counseling.<sup>6</sup>

Commonsensical as his findings are, two things are nonetheless remarkable about Jackson's study. One is the suggestion that our guesses and axioms about preaching styles can actually be tested. Although Jackson is quick to admit that his study did not conform to strict research methods, it does offer striking evidence that rhetorical techniques can have quite specific effects, and that we can study them and study our people if we develop the methods to do so.

The other conclusion to be drawn is that the results of such studies cannot themselves determine how they are to be used in preaching. Jackson's little bit of knowledge presented him with a

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<sup>6</sup> Edgar N. Jackson, A Psychology for Preaching (Great Neck, NY: Channel Press, 1961), pp. 49-60.

difficult choice: pleasing people and increasing church attendance by the repressive-inspirational method, or provoking and challenging them at a possible cost in church revenue and psychic crisis by the analytical method.

Another study cited by Jackson raises a similar problem. The study attempted to correlate styles of argument with the educational background of the audience.<sup>7</sup> It was found that highly educated audiences were most apt to be persuaded by presentation of arguments both for and against a given position, whereas less educated audiences were best persuaded by a forceful presentation of only one side of the issue.

A direct application of this experiment to preaching would suggest that we adopt something like the medieval division of the well-argued sermon ex cathedra for the intellectual elite and colorful hortatory for the masses. Our reading of Kierkegaard should give us pause here. Is a one-sided presentation of Christianity theologically permitted? What is the appropriate use of pros and cons in preaching? Whether we follow Kierkegaard here or not, the point is clear. Application of the results of audience analysis to preaching must be governed by theological criteria and by the preacher's own clear sense of the aims of Christian discourse. Theological considerations may lead us to do the opposite of what communications studies recommend.

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<sup>7</sup> Jackson, p. 27.

An additional problem with appropriating communications studies is that the preacher is normally dealing with a very different kind of communication than the communications theorist. Merrill Abbey's Communication in Pulpit and Parish is an excellent introduction to communications theory for preachers. Yet the models he presents are all based on a notion of communication as a flow of information, encoded, enchanneled, decoded, and fed back. These models are, in effect, sophisticated pictures of what Kierkegaard called "the communication of knowledge." They were not designed to portray subjectivity and personal transformation, and for that reason they are of very limited usefulness in helping us to understand the communication of Christianity, except possibly by contrast.

In Kierkegaardian categories the use of communications studies, and more broadly of the social sciences, is subject to the advantages and limitations of the quantitative dialectic. They freeze subjectivity into a particular outward expression and merge it into generalizations. The use of such study for preaching is broadly orientative; it describes the general patterns of response within which an individual's subjectivity moves, and can perhaps provide some rules of thumb for structuring our sermons. But the preacher who relies on them in place of analyzing his/her own congregation will be . . . all thumbs.

To meet the interpretive needs of a pastor in a local church we need an observational method that is much more localized, one that can link the commonplaces of the culture with the inward structures of

meaning of persons in our congregations. The purpose here would not be to generalize about an audience, but to articulate its complexity.

In the words of anthropologist Clifford Geertz, we are after a "thick description" of our congregations. Geertz borrowed the term from Gilbert Ryle and used it to describe the task of ethnography.<sup>8</sup> A thick description tries to characterize a concept or event in its full range of meanings within the context in which it occurs. A simple example given by Ryle is of a boy rapidly contracting the eyelids of one eye. This could be either a twitch or a wink, but these two possibilities break down into further refinements. If a twitch, it could be a symptom of a disease, or just a speck of dust in the eye. If a wink, it could be an indication of a conspiracy, a greeting, a mock wink, a practice wink, or whatever further complications an Oxford don could contrive. An account of these possibilities for meaning constitutes the "grammar" with which to interpret the boy's gesture (or symptom).

For Geertz, to understand a specific cultural ethos is to construct a thick description of the structures of meaning within it and of how the individual "informants" structure their own meanings from among the possibilities presented by the culture. The success of such an ethnography is not in its generalizations but in its specificity: "What generality it contrives to achieve grows out of the delicacy of its distinctions, not the sweep of its abstractions."<sup>9</sup> His goal here is

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<sup>8</sup> Clifford Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 6 ff.

<sup>9</sup> Geertz, p. 25.

analogous to that of Kierkegaard, to present so precise a map of the religious situation that you could not help but find yourself in it.

Of course preachers don't write ethnographies; they write sermons. But much of the success or failure of a sermon depends upon how carefully the preacher has charted the levels of meaning in it, and how precisely these have been linked to the listener's own structure of meaning. The kind of analysis that makes such linkage possible draws on the combined resources of theology, ethnography, and psychology. Diane Tennis provides a good example of this approach in her recent article, "The Loss of the Father God: Why Women Rage and Grieve."<sup>10</sup> She gives a thick description of the father image in our culture, its function in a woman's personality, and the impact of these two factors on her relationship to God. Both the negative experiences of dependence, domination, and absence and the positive ones of strength and reliability are shown in their connection to women's concepts of God, and to characteristically feminine forms of sin. Tennis' analysis provides a semantic framework for understanding the resistance of women to inclusive language. Most important for preaching, such analysis raises the possibility of dealing with the crisis in God-language at a deeper level than terminology, by tracing the connection between terminology and personality. Without an understanding of the cultural and psychological semantics of religious language a preacher may retain

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<sup>10</sup> Diane Tennis, "The Loss of the Father God: Why Women Rage and Grieve," Christianity and Crisis 41 (June 1981), 164-70.

control over the language used in preaching and liturgy, but not over what it means to the listener.

The example of ethnography suggests that homiletics should focus on methods of audience analysis rather than on general theories of the audience or of communication. No cybernetic model and no set of experimental results drawn from another context can provide us with the intimate knowledge of our people that we need, nor does it simply come by guesswork and intuition. The question for any discipline is what can be shared among cases and among its practitioners. Regarding audience analysis we can share reflections on theological anthropology, and we can share observational methods and case studies, but none of these can ever make it possible to understand an audience without knowing it.

#### DIALECTIC AND ARGUMENT IN PREACHING

We saw in Chapter Three that Kierkegaard's dialectic was the principle source and regulator of his rhetorical arguments. As we turn our attention now to the disciplinary needs of homiletics, it is important to remember that dialectic and argument are not the same thing, although their place in rhetoric will always be closely related. Clearly not all argument is dialectical, but neither is all dialectic a form of argument. It is also and perhaps first a way of thinking, a tool for reflection and exploration. Along with Kierkegaard, we may mention Paul Ricoeur's dialectic of suspicion and recovery of meaning and Kenneth Burke's "dramatistic" model. Both of these are aimed at the exploratory and hermeneutical functions of dialectic; they are more

concerned with self-deliberation and with interpretation of than with interpretation to.

By contrast, argument aims at influencing, persuading, or convincing an auditor, and in rhetorical usage it includes anything a speaker does knowingly to achieve these ends. (The reason for taking such a broad view of argument is important to note, for anything we place beyond argument in speaking is also beyond criticism.) The thought process by which a speaker arrives at an understanding will not necessarily be the same process by which it is communicated, or by which an auditor will reach understanding. This is one reason why there is no direct passage from exegesis to sermon, and for the same reason we need to maintain a distinction between dialectic and rhetorical argument. Dialectic is needed to judge the validity of an argument, but the special concern of rhetoric is with its effectiveness for the listener.

We should further note that for rhetorical purposes argument is not limited to defending a thesis the speaker holds to be true or refuting one held to be false. We may, for example, argue on behalf of something we know to be false, either with the outright intention of deceiving, or with the more subtle intention of "deceiving into the truth," by projecting the discovery of truth beyond our words to the listener's response. This is partly what Kierkegaard did with indirect communication. But such argument can also be put into a larger class in which, whether there is deception or not, the intent of the argument is not to urge a particular truth, but to urge a way to the truth. In this sense much of the exploratory function of dialectic becomes a form of

argument when its way to the truth is rehearsed in public discourse. This is the aspect of argument that Kierkegaard would compel us to develop in our preaching, because in his thinking it best fits the "kind" of truth Christianity is.

Rhetorical argument is thus a function of both the subject with which it deals and the audience to which it is addressed. It is not surprising that the role of argument in the preaching of the church has largely paralleled developments in the intellectual culture that envelopes it. Kierkegaard's dialectical style was in part developed in relation to the reigning Hegelianism of his time and incorporates a number of Hegelian categories. To appreciate the challenge facing contemporary homiletics in its use of argument we likewise need to examine our present epistemological climate.

To speak of argument at all may seem rather pedantic to many preachers, although it once had a standard place in the divisio of the sermon, both in scholastic preaching and again in response to the rationalism of the Enlightenment. The American Puritan sermon often contained an enumerated list of arguments in defense of a thesis drawn from the text; the longer the list the more convincing the sermon.

It was partly in reaction against the role assigned to reason in preaching, especially against the apparent elevation of rational certainty over experience and personal conviction, that argument fell into disrepute in the American homiletics of the last century. Thus in the first seventy years of the Lyman Beecher Lectures, only fifteen of the lecturers gave attention to argument, and most of them treated it



with suspicion.<sup>11</sup> In some cases their counsel is worthy of the Sophists, as this from Henry Ward Beecher:

Take things for granted, and men will not think to dispute them, but will admit them, and go on with you and become better men than if they had been treated to a logical process of argument, which aroused in them an argumentative spirit of doubt and opposition.<sup>12</sup>

The minority opinion saw the need to retain argument as the only alternative to "authoritative assertion and impassioned appeal,"<sup>13</sup> "mere declamation or rhapsody,"<sup>14</sup> but here the concept of argument remains deductive, the demonstration by syllogism of religious "truths."

The problem that faces contemporary homiletics is suggested by the fact that these earlier authors could speak unselfconsciously of religious truth, while we need to enclose it in quotation marks to indicate its questionability. The preacher can no longer be assumed without further ado to be in possession of the truth, either about the biblical text or the theological assertions derived from it.

The problem is due in part to the rise of the ideal of mathematical certainty and the empirical methods of the natural sciences as the contemporary arbiters of truth. Logical positivism reversed the claims of the Hegelians that religious truths could be comprehended under the "Higher Logic." Since religious claims are not statements of logical relations nor are they empirically verifiable, they weren't

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<sup>11</sup> Batsell B. Baxter, The Heart of the Yale Lectures (New York: Macmillan, 1947), pp. 261-66.

<sup>12</sup> Henry Ward Beecher, Yale Lectures on Preaching, First Series (New York: Ford, 1872), p. 125.

<sup>13</sup> Baxter, p. 263; citing John Broadus.

<sup>14</sup> Baxter, p. 262; citing Howard Crosby.

thought to be comprehensible at all, except as emotive expressions. As Bertrand Russell put it, "As logic improves, less and less can be proved."<sup>15</sup> It follows that if logic in Russell's sense is to be the basis of argument, then less and less can be argued, and more and more is left to "mere assertion and rhapsody."

If logical positivism has lost much of its steam as a philosophical movement, it has nonetheless left a residue of embarrassment for religious discourse. And our embarrassment is not simply before a few professors of philosophy; the epistemology they articulated has been absorbed as commonplace among the educated class of Western culture. It must also be admitted that there is a subtle temptation here for preachers. We may loudly attack the shriveled logic of positivism or "scientism" while harboring a secret pleasure to be relieved of the burden of rationality and free to emote the Gospel.

We are not to be let off the hook so easily, however, for developments from another quarter have brought even these religious "feelings" under suspicion. The Freudian and Marxist critiques of consciousness, historicism, and sociology of knowledge have powerfully demonstrated the extent to which our values and beliefs are conditioned by psychological, cultural, and economic factors. Wayne Booth has summarized their effect on public discourse on values and the place of practical reason under the rubric of "motivism":

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<sup>15</sup> Cited by Wayne C. Booth, Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 42.

"Look for the secret motive" has at least until recently been a slogan in many disciplines, and the unexamined assumption has been that if you can find it—that is, if you can find a class interest or a sexual drive or a kinship interest or a childhood trauma—you have explained away whatever "surface reasons" anyone offers for his beliefs or actions.<sup>16</sup>

The demotion of argument follows:

Arguments for our beliefs or actions have become "mere rhetoric" or propaganda or rationalization. Passionate commitment has lost its connection with the provision of good reasons. And reason has been reduced to logical calculation and proof about whatever does not matter enough to engage commitment.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to these developments in the intellectual climate, many of which are only indirectly absorbed by the non-academic, there must be added the problem of pluralism, which has a much more direct impact on the person in the pew. The cultural and religious heritage is no longer handed down in a unified tradition. Since the 50's at least, coming of age in America has meant choosing from among a multiplicity of traditions and values. The effort of the religious right to establish an American Christendom is itself evidence of the shock of pluralism. In a term borrowed from sociology of knowledge, there are a variety of "plausibility structures" existing side by side in the same culture. While these structures may provide internal criteria for judging values, there appears to be no solid ground from which to judge among the structures themselves.

To the extent that these developments have affected the church, it has been to fill our pews with increasing numbers of secularists who

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<sup>16</sup> Booth, p. 25.

<sup>17</sup> Booth, p. xi.

give passive assent to their churchly tradition without actually believing it, and perhaps an even greater number of fideists who continue to assert their beliefs despite what they "know." As Gerhard Ebeling put it, "Faith and the understanding of reality are in danger of breaking apart."<sup>18</sup> The church threatens to become an epistemological ghetto. The congregation can perhaps hide this development by keeping silent, but the preacher has to speak.

Each of these three aspects of the modern ethos—positivism or scientism, motivism, and pluralism—suggests the need for a revival of dialectic as the "logic" of ethical and religious discourse. Non-verifiability is another way of saying uncertainty, and this is the domain of dialectic. Likewise the cluster of perspectives Booth calls motivism would need to be confronted rhetorically with something like the Socratic dialectic which seeks to unmask illusions, and pluralism recalls the multiplicity of viewpoints which is yet another aspect of dialectical reasoning.

Kierkegaard's numerous dialectics are a valuable model for us here, but there is also a growing contemporary literature on which to draw. Stephen Toulmin's The Uses of Argument lays out a "field-dependent" structure of argument derived from jurisprudence that incorporates values and objective uncertainty as part of the reasoning process. The model has been used by Jurgen Habermas for a "logic of discourse" in the social sciences and by James C. McCroskey as a general

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<sup>18</sup> Gerhard Ebeling, The Nature of Faith (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), p. 118.

model of rhetorical argument. The most exhaustive account in print of the rich varieties of argumentative form is Chaim Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca's The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation. As much a catalog as a treatise, it incorporates over 1400 examples drawn from politicians, preachers, philosophers, and poets. Both this work and Toulmin's are explicitly concerned with liberating argument from the restrictions of the mathematical or positivist model and applying it to discourse on values and convictions. In Understanding Religious Convictions James McClendon and James Smith examine the relationship of pluralism to values discourse. They propose a "speech-acts" approach to the justification of convictions and as a basis for dialogue between conflicting "conviction-sets." Wayne Booth's Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent confronts the same problem with a rhetoric derived from the styles of argument employed in literature and literary criticism. We could add the more complex contributions to dialectic of Paul Ricoeur, Theodore Adorno, and Kenneth Burke, as well as the continued interest in the classical tradition shown in the works of Richard McKeon, Richard Weaver, and George Kennedy.

These works are but a small taste of the extensive literature that is reviving many of the traditional concerns of dialectic and rhetorical argument. None of these bears a direct relationship to preaching, any more than Aristotle's rhetoric did, but they offer a rich resource to homiletics if we apply the same careful criticism to them that Kierkegaard gave to Aristotle. As yet few homileticians have taken up the task. Only H. Grady Davis has devoted an entire text to

argumentative form in homiletics, Design for Preaching, and that was over twenty years ago. The only other such study to my knowledge is Fred Craddock's analysis of inductive argument, As One Without Authority. As the title suggests, the book owes much to the spirit of Kierkegaard.

The kind of critical appropriation undertaken by Davis and Craddock is not an optional source of enrichment for our preaching; it is imperative, for we invariably argue when we preach. The Beecher lecturers who rejected argument in homiletics surely used it in their preaching, although they may not have recognized it as such. More recent advocates of a kerygmatic norm for preaching seem to suggest that a preacher should not argue, only proclaim. As Karl Barth put it in his notes on The Preaching of the Gospel, "Revelation is a closed system in which God is the subject, the object, and the middle term."<sup>19</sup> The task of the preacher, he suggests on nearly every page, is to listen and proclaim, adding nothing to the text but obedience. Yet Barth's apparent rejection of argument in preaching is upon closer examination an argument for the primacy of one form of argument over others, i.e., argument from the authority of revelation. The only way completely to avoid adding our own arguments to those of the text would be simply to read it—preferably in a monotone, lest we argue by intonation.

The question then is not whether we will argue, but whether we will test the arguments we actually use for their validity and

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<sup>19</sup> Karl Barth, The Preaching of the Gospel (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), p. 12.

effectiveness in religious discourse. If homiletical argument is "field-dependent" in Toulmin's sense, then the criteria for such testing will be not only formal or dialectical, but also theological and rhetorical. These three will always be interrelated for any given preacher, but in a context of theological pluralism it would not be possible to apply a single set of critical criteria to all preaching. To every hierarchy of values and commitments, including theology, there corresponds a hierarchy of arguments which our preaching will reflect. Different theologies will generate different preferred forms of argument, and spelling these out in each theological tradition is the necessary first step in developing the critical criteria we need.

In turn, the formal validity of a homiletical argument is independent of our agreement on its theological premises. Kierkegaard's criticisms of the sermons he heard are rarely directed against their theological content, but their dialectical form. He judged an argument to be formally "bad" if it was inconsistent, if it brought in unwanted presuppositions along with the desired conclusion, or led to unwanted consequences. The minimal requirement here would be that preachers do not contradict themselves and that they earn their conclusions, not merely assert them. In any sermon there may be "bad" theology well-argued or "good" theology argued poorly, and homiletics needs to learn to tell the difference.

In preaching, a good argument must also be an effective one, and for this theological consistency and formal validity may not be enough. It is the special role of rhetoric to evaluate how an argument achieves

its aim in the listener's response. I say "response" and not "assent" or "persuasion," for our aim may be to provoke dissent, and as Kierkegaard demonstrated, there are many forms of assent to religious discourse that are not yet faith.

These three sources of critical criteria are therefore distinct but necessarily related in that no one of them alone would be sufficient to evaluate homiletical argument. Attempts to let theology alone set the standard have too often led to partisan prescriptions, e.g., every sermon should preach both Gospel and Law; a good sermon should demand a decision for Christ; stick to the text, the whole text, and nothing but the text; preaching is an elucidation of dogmatics. These injunctions prescribe styles of argument without actually providing them, and they fail to do justice to the variety of theologies among preachers. Conversely, most homileticians are only too aware of the muddle created by letting rhetoric alone do the job. We are left with a triad: homiletical argument should be theologically faithful, dialectically valid, and rhetorically effective.

What is suggested here is the need for a general theory of homiletical argument, not a Kierkegaardian, Barthian, Methodist, or Presbyterian homiletics, that would develop the critical tools needed for intelligent discussion, evaluation, and revision of the special homiletics generated by our many theologies and traditions. The scarcity of serious scholarly debate among homileticians is an indication of our need. Perhaps we don't argue with one another because



we're not clear about what argument is in homiletics, or what there is to argue about.

The goal of such a theory would not be to prescribe how all preachers should argue, but to provide each preacher with the resources of a scholarly discipline to find a style of homiletical argument consistent with his or her theological convictions. If we learn anything from Kierkegaard in this regard it is that it is more important to have one preacher who is theologically, dialectically, and rhetorically consistent than to produce even the finest prescriptive handbook on homiletics.

#### THE "ART" OF PREACHING

Our study of Kierkegaard's rhetoric suggests the need to re-examine our notions of the "art" in preaching. This is not so much a matter of adding a few of his techniques to our repertoire (which can also be done with profit, if done with care), but of forming a notion of art that is adequate to Christian preaching.

First, we need to be clear about what we mean by "art." The term is often applied to preaching as an honorific title, suggesting that preaching at its best attains the high status of literature. In this manner a few exemplars such as Donne, Edwards, and Bossuet are studied along with the great essayists. On aesthetic grounds this is entirely appropriate, but from a Christian standpoint the highest aim of a sermon is surely not that it should merit the attentions of a literature class.

The homiletical tradition has normally treated the art in preaching under the rubrics of style, illustration, and delivery. Regarding style the Beecher lecturers were at one in recommending the classical virtues of clarity, forcefulness, and beauty. Illustration was "to give color to the style and interest to the thought," to "entertain," "rivet attention," and aid the memory.<sup>20</sup> Judged by their own standards the preachers of this tradition were artful indeed. Their sermons sustained a high level of literary quality and abounded in apt and entertaining illustrations. If the goal of their art was eloquence, by and large they achieved it.

Yet these "princes of the pulpit" have very few remaining imitators. Homiletics professors are invariably faced with the question, "Why don't we have great preachers anymore?" Certainly part of the answer lies in a shift in conceptions of the pastoral role which places less emphasis on preaching. More young pastors aspire to be good counselors, organizers and administrators rather than preachers. But there has also been a shift in our notions of good preaching. Communication has replaced art as the term of honor, and the ideal orator is no longer William Jennings Bryan but Walter Cronkite.<sup>21</sup> A plain, reportorial style is favored, and the appearance of verbal artifice is likely to arouse suspicion rather than admiration. To summarize the present situation rather broadly, the notion of art that

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<sup>20</sup> Baxter, pp. 149-150.

<sup>21</sup> I am speaking here of standard brand Protestantism. Exceptions should be made for the occasional high-church poetic style, folk preaching, and the special class of television evangelists.

prevailed in homiletics through the first half of this century has been quietly abandoned, but as yet no alternative idea of the artistic aspect of preaching has taken its place. From our study of Kierkegaard, we can offer some reasons for this abandonment, and a few suggestions on a new start.

We can take our first clues from the root metaphors that have dominated the homiletical conception of art. In the nineteenth century the epitome of art was the oil painting. Accordingly, few homileticians of that period (and since) have failed to employ the analogy to that form: sermons must be "pictorial," "The wise preacher knows that he must paint pictures if he is to move men."<sup>22</sup> This visual and representational orientation is expressed by the term for the main homiletic artifice: "illustration." Consider Buttrick's famous dictum: "A sermon without illustrations is like a house without windows. A sermon with trivial or bathetic illustrations is worse: it is like a house with the windows broken and the holes stuffed with rags and straw."<sup>23</sup> Buttrick achieves a "reduplication" here; he makes his point about illustration through a simile that is itself a model (i.e. pictorial) illustration. But simile is also a rhetorical form of argument, and as such it rests upon a presupposition: Buttrick posits that there is a house into which windows can be let. To put it more directly, the art of illustration supposes that there is a structure of meaning built up by the ideas and propositions of the sermon that are

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<sup>22</sup> Baxter, p. 172.

<sup>23</sup> Cited by Baxter, p. 157.

then illuminated by illustrations. In the same manner the painting analogy assumes a definite object that can be pictured by the sermon.

It is this supposition that our study of Kierkegaard would lead us to challenge. Not that vivid and concrete language is to be rejected, but that the analogies to painting and architecture are inadequate to the communication of Christianity if they are taken as the principal guides. The question here is not whether the preaching of those who employed the analogy was likewise inadequate. For the most part the Beecher lecturers were far better preachers than theorists. Probably very few of them made a careful study of the aesthetics of painting in relation to homiletics. But when they tried to describe what they were doing and pass it on to other preachers they invariably saw themselves as painting pictures and erecting buildings. Along with the virtues of style drawn from classical rhetoric, this analogy to painting and architecture forms the heart of "art theory" in the homiletical tradition.

As an experiment, then, let us press the analogy a bit farther than the Beecher lecturers did, and see where it leads. A painting, for example, is static; that is one of its virtues. It fixes in time what is otherwise fleeting; it can communicate a scene, a mood, a moment, but it is finally bound to a single point. A sermon, however, is necessarily an event in time, so that when it absorbs the aesthetic of painting, it "moves" only by jumping from point to point. The preacher then becomes something like a tour guide at an art museum. A "well illustrated" sermon can produce the same disorientation and

fragmentation of consciousness as too fast a trip through the museum. The confusion may well be worse with the sermon, for the average collection of illustrations has less internal coherence than a collection of paintings.

The kind of painting to which the analogy is drawn presents a further problem. The painting that attracted the emulation of preachers was thoroughly representational. The goal was to render a given object as directly present to the eye (or the mind's eye) as possible. This approach corresponds best to an objective notion of what is to be communicated. In preaching it is well suited to the notion of a set of Christian truths that can be the subject of its art. For both analogies, to representational painting and to architecture, the assumption is that the truth has only to be made clearly and vividly present, as tangible as a bowl of fruit, to warrant assent.<sup>24</sup>

Here, of course, is where Kierkegaard comes in, with the contention that Christian truth is not objective truth, and that an aesthetic or poetic rooted in a correspondence to the realm of objects is unsuited to express the inwardness of subjects. To stay with the painting analogy a bit longer, the recent history of painting is a reaction against much the same limitation. Impressionists, expressionists, and their later offspring broke with the neo-classical

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<sup>24</sup> For an analysis of how thoroughly object-oriented the Western tradition of painting has been, see John Berger, Ways of Seeing (London: Penguin, 1977). Berger's socio-economic approach reveals a striking fixation on property, class, and power relationships as the subject matter of pre-twentieth century painting.

tradition in painting just as Kierkegaard broke with neo-classical rhetoric. The expression and evocation of inwardness required a sacrifice of objectivity, strange images and associations, distortions of surface reality, and therefore a sacrifice of immediate recognition.

The aesthetic rift between Kierkegaard and the homiletical tradition rests also on a deeper theological and metaphysical difference. Representational preaching like its counterpart in painting relies implicitly on an analogy of being, an assumption that in the harmony of God's creation the realm of nature stands in a relationship of proportionality and correspondence to the realm of the spirit. Kierkegaard in his turn emphasizes the qualitative difference between the two and puts strict limitations on any use of an analogia entis. Like his counterparts in painting, Kierkegaard inverts, stretches, and distorts the representational functions of language to create a verbal art adequate to his vision of Christianity.

The treatment of metaphor and simile is a case in point. Consider the direct correspondences in Buttrick's simile: illustration is to sermon as window is to house. The simile achieves a transfer of concreteness or objectification from one term to another and it has the further stylistic virtues of harmony and proportion. It invites immediate assent. Here is one from Kierkegaard: sliminess is to fish as hypocrisy is to human.<sup>25</sup> Formally they are the same, but the effect is entirely different. It is not simply that Kierkegaard's is

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<sup>25</sup> JP II, #2053.

tendentious, but that it is so wildly disproportionate. It does not invite assent to the logical relations between the terms so much as it provokes squeamish laughter. The point of his simile is not to argue that all people are hypocritical by nature, but to draw out the appropriate subjective response to hypocrisy.

Kierkegaard's use of metaphor and image expands their implications beyond immediate presentation and assent; he is as likely to use metaphor to express dissonance from everyday reality as similarity. As Louis Mackey puts it, Kierkegaard's forte is the "broken metaphor" and the "inverted image."<sup>26</sup> God as a good shepherd or a loving parent we can relate to directly, but what about God in the figure of "a very rare and tremendously large green bird, with a red beak, sitting on a tree in the mound, and perhaps even whistling in an unheard of manner?"<sup>27</sup> As an image of God, any outward analogy is rejected as ridiculous. But the inward analogy holds: what is truly worthy of ridicule is that we would take immediate notice of the bird, but constantly fail to take notice of God. Kierkegaard's images thus do not present themselves immediately. They are "pictorial," to be sure, but they all bear Mona Lisa's smile: we are left wondering what's behind it. His images go beyond the presentational to puzzle and provoke.

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<sup>26</sup> Louis Mackey, Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), p. 259f.

<sup>27</sup> CUP, p. 219.

In his capacity as a "Christian humorist," Kierkegaard described his art as "like a plant of which only the roots are visible, whose flower unfolds for a loftier sun."<sup>28</sup> It is a good expression for the indirection that pervades Kierkegaard's aesthetic. While the traditional arts of preaching offer bouquets, Kierkegaard burrows underground. To see the flower you have to cross over to the realm of spirit.

To the limited degree that Kierkegaard's art follows an aesthetic of painting, he is perhaps closest to surrealism and trompe l'oeil. His uses of the pictorial are thus a good corrective to the misplaced concreteness found in much of the homiletical literature. But if we are to look among other media for an analogy to Kierkegaard's art, it would not be to painting. Nor would it be to poetry, except perhaps in the very broadest sense in which Kierkegaard used the term. Although he often designates himself as a poet, in his usage it implies little more in a formal sense than the imaginative use of language.

The analogy that best suits Kierkegaard's artistic sensibility is to what was also his favorite medium: drama. And this artistic analogy rests in turn on the kinds of analogy to which Kierkegaard characteristically reverts in his own thinking. His thought does not revolve around an analogia entis, but what we might call for want of a better term, an analogy of the soul. Kierkegaard saw the image of God in humanity as the possibility of becoming a self, "becoming spirit,"

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<sup>28</sup> JP II, #1690.



through a relationship to God. The events of selfhood--subjective states, valuations, personal relationships, choice, and action--are thus the very groundwork of his thought and art. His is a way of seeing and telling that does not begin with things or with reified ideas, but with human life in medias res. From this he drew and constructed countless verbal analogues.

The tools of drama were therefore well suited to his task: scene, character, dialogue, action, plot--together they enabled him to express the crises of the human spirit in its encounter with Christianity. The religious discourses as well as the pseudonymous works are populated with characters--kings, maidens, unhappy lovers, melancholy sufferers, foolish youths. Even the lilies and the birds are not innocent creatures of nature, but crafty or gullible, foolish or wise like their human counterparts. It is by these characters and the little dramas they play out that Kierkegaard's readers most often identify his works. His authorship is so permeated with the dramatic that it requires only an enterprising (if unscrupulous) editor to bring it to Broadway.

It would be a mistake, however, to apply the analogy too directly. The most we could say here without incurring Kierkegaard's posthumous wrath is that the discourses may be likened to scripts to be read aloud, staged, and performed by the reader. In this regard Kierkegaard steadfastly preferred the role of prompter. The main point to be observed is that the resources of the dramatic medium are thoroughly controlled and transformed by his Christian rhetorical

purposes. There are therefore gaps and irresolutions, unfinished scenes that are meant to be completed by the reader, by placing him/herself in the role.

We will not go further here in detailing Kierkegaard's employment of the dramatic, some of which has already been suggested in previous chapters. The question at hand is the more general one of how the elements of drama can inform our art of preaching. The main analogy is not to performance, lest the preacher slip back into being an actor, but to dramatic construction. One of the fundamentals is to develop an "ear" for the many voices that would be heard in the sermon—specifically the voices of the listeners, for the aim is to be able at the right time to transform your voice into theirs. As Kenneth Burke reminds us, "Only those voices from without are effective which can speak in the language of a voice within."<sup>29</sup>

The second fundamental is to cultivate the ability to think in terms of situations or "scenes." Kierkegaard often jotted down observations under the heading: "Situation," which would later be developed as scenes or parables in a discourse. (It is equally important to imagine alternatives as it is to capture "true life stories," for possibilities and fantasies are as much a part of the subjective reality as outward occurrences.) Situational thinking is a salutary discipline for keeping thought and existence together.

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<sup>29</sup> Kenneth Burke, A Rhetoric of Motives (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), p. 39.

We have already noted in Chapter 3 the affinities of drama with dialectical forms of argument. The interaction of characters enables the introduction of multiple points of view, point and counterpoint; dramatic tension and action allow complex motives and consequences to emerge. These forms of presentation are more in conformity with our actual religious life than the discursive and hortatory forms that have been the staples of homiletics. If there is to be action there must also be location, and the question of relevant scene discussed in Chapter 5 also is derived from the analogy to drama and has an essential place in the sermon.

Finally, the idea of plot has implications for the structure of the sermon as a whole. Our structural conventions have fortunately expanded beyond the introduction/three points/conclusion format, but they are still too often extrinsic to the proper aims of the sermon. Techniques of arranging the "sermon matter" for clarity in presentation are fine for imparting information, but they appeal to a very narrow range of the subjective processes of our listeners. By conceiving the overall movement of the sermon on the analogy to plot, attention is drawn to inherent, organic structures of interaction, tension, crisis, and resolution--features that are more consonant with the rhetorical aim of the sermon.

These are but a few possibilities for enriching the art of our preaching if we care to give it the same dedication that other artists give to their work. Certainly much is to be gained if these analogies

to other media can help break the weight of unthinking homiletical habit.

Several pedagogical techniques come readily to mind. Students could be directed to analyze the religious self-expression of people in their congregations and to incorporate their language in dramatic dialogues and soliloquies. Sermonic structures could be studied with regard to "plot conventions," scene, characterization, action, pace, tension, and climax. Biblical texts could be interpreted from the viewpoints of different imagined characters. Whatever virtue these techniques may hold is not in innovation for itself, but in the possibility of forming a notion of art that is adequate to the Gospel. First and last, Kierkegaard would have us remember that nothing in preaching is to be done solely for ornament or effect, that all our art, form, and style convey meaning, for better or for worse. For all the salutary effects of the current rejection of the old arts of preaching in favor of "sharing," "relating," and "communicating," Kierkegaard would remind us that the communication of Christianity requires its own distinctive art--if "the truth is to be presented in its truest form."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> For an insightful analysis of the verbal art of Jesus and the Gospels see Robert C. Tannehill, The Sword of His Mouth (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975). O.C. Edwards, The Living and Active Word (New York: Seabury Press, 1975) contains some instructive experimentation with sermonic form. The analogy of drama to rhetoric forms the heart of Kenneth Burke's fascinating but eccentric Grammar of Motives (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

## PREACHING AND PRAXIS

One of Kierkegaard's most frequently cited parables may be quoted here once again, since it so aptly expresses the problem this section needs to address:

Imagine a country. A royal command is issued to all the office-bearers and subjects, in short, to the whole population. A remarkable change comes over them all: they all become interpreters, the office-bearers become authors, every blessed day there comes out an interpretation more learned than the last, more acute, more elegant, more profound, more ingenious, more wonderful, more charming, more wonderfully charming. Criticism which ought to survey the whole can hardly attain survey of this prodigious literature, indeed criticism itself has become a literature so prolix that it is impossible to attain a survey of the criticism. Everything became interpretation—but no one read the royal command with a view to acting in accordance with it. And it was not only that everything became interpretation, but at the same time the point of view for determining what seriousness is was altered, and to be busy about interpretation became real seriousness. Suppose that this king was not a human king . . . Suppose that this king was almighty . . . What do you suppose this almighty king would think about such a thing?<sup>31</sup>

Kierkegaard's parable clearly illustrates the strange involution that occurs when an utterance with ethical force is enthusiastically interpreted but never enacted. Discourse turns in upon itself and may even exhibit a cancerous vitality, but finally the language is exhausted when nothing follows from it. This has been one of the most difficult points for rhetoricians to grasp: that rhetoric is not an end in itself. Whether Christian or secular it aims beyond itself to its effect on an audience, on their attitudes, decisions, and actions. If it is any good it will have earned this effect by standards to which

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<sup>31</sup> FSE, pp. 58-59. See also AR, pp. 108-110.

speaker and listener are both finally bound. But neither art nor argument will prevent rhetoric from degenerating to sophistry if it is not grounded in a context of action. Just as classical rhetoric died with the Roman Senate, and was revived by the reappearance of political institutions that allowed for public deliberation, so is preaching bound to and limited by the Christian praxis of the Church.

Kierkegaard's discourses were no exception in this regard. He was acutely aware that the stunted Christianity of his Copenhagen required a "corrective" of him, not a carefully balanced presentation of the "full Gospel." The limitations he faced can be guessed at from a few rough statistics: "In Copenhagen at the middle of the Nineteenth Century, not a new church had been built in a period of 150 years. There were only six parish churches serving a population of 150,000. As a consequence there were mass baptisms, mass marriages, mass funerals."<sup>32</sup> Add to this a priesthood that was virtually a branch of the civil service and a near total orientation of the church to worship, and it is not surprising that the context of action Kierkegaard was able to contemplate in his discourses was rather limited. The praxis he urges is mainly focused on private acts of piety, and even these are largely unspecified. As we have seen there are ample reasons for this that are internal to Kierkegaard's thought, but even these cannot be fully dissociated from the context in which he worked.

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<sup>32</sup> Ragnar Askmark, "The Scandanavian Churches," in Lutheran Churches of the World (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1957), p. 110.

Without claiming that we have progressed beyond those Danish Lutherans of a century ago, it is nonetheless true that contemporary North American churches show greater outward signs of vitality. Our calendars are full: seminars, "enrichment" weekends, luncheons, circles and teas, foreign and domestic missions, hunger action groups, corporate responsibility groups, lobbying groups left and right. There seems to be no aspect of modern life in which at least some of us are not involved in the name of the Church. This efflorescence of activity presents praxis-oriented preaching with new opportunities and new burdens. But despite the differences in context, there are still a few things we may learn from Kierkegaard's rhetoric.

The first point to be observed is that praxis is not activity pure and simple, but action that is an expression of reflection and contextual analysis. The term has this usage in liberation theology, but it seems equally appropriate to Kierkegaard's idea of action as the middle term in existential interpretation of the Bible. Church activities are to be understood as praxis only in connection with their biblical and theological grounding. Without this, much of what is done in the name of the Church is indistinguishable from the activities of a humanitarian club. As a Mexican priest said of his work organizing peasant co-operatives, "We want them to understand that we are doing this because we are Christians, and not because we are nice people." Praxis, then, is not a matter of following our interests or responding to perceived needs; it is action that interprets the Gospel.

As interpretation, praxis is both expression of the Gospel and a means of understanding it. As James D. Smart maintains, scripture "has to be proclaimed and heard and have its fruits in life before anyone, even though he be the most accomplished scholar, can rightly understand its nature."<sup>33</sup> If this relationship holds, then reference to praxis can no more be dispensed with in preaching than the Bible itself. We need to conceive of the interpretive event as incomplete in the sermon alone, as stretching beyond the preaching and the hearing to the doing.

The point is easy enough to grasp in the abstract, but it is more difficult to structure our sermons accordingly. We are not speaking here of an occasional topical sermon on a social issue or of "working in" a few references to church programs. At issue is an approach to interpretation that is permeated by the dialogue of scripture with the life of the Church and its people. Such preaching will not be an isolated event or a finished product, but will grow out of and return to an ongoing life. And it is likely to be unsatisfying for those who do not participate in that life.

One of the most effective preachers I have known did not seem to be much good when I first began attending his services. He seemed the very antithesis of a good public speaker. His sermons wandered terribly, and generally ended whenever he ran out of time; they seemed an odd mixture of biblical exposition and parish news. It was not until I became involved in that congregation that I realized what he was

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<sup>33</sup> Smart, p. 33. Emphasis mine.



doing. Reflections on his sermons kept cropping up in committee meetings. People were as likely to be making plans and delegating responsibilities during the coffee hour as they were to be discussing how good the sermon was. His sermons were, in effect, a weekly commentary and reflection on the life of that church.

This kind of preaching naturally has its risks. "Worship-only" members tend to drop away as do newcomers who are looking for a good performance. When preaching follows its listeners closely, it tends to reflect the unevenness of their lives. It may often sacrifice the principles of a well-ordered speech to shape itself organically to the actual situation. Such preaching is especially marked by its unfinished character, not offering itself neatly arranged on a plate, but anticipating the subsequent actions of the listeners as its completion. As our study of Kierkegaard indicates, such rhetorical projections require at least as much care in construction as a more aesthetically pleasing finished product.

If it is not to be soft-headed, Christian praxis must be founded on careful contextual analysis. The role of preaching here carries something of what Aristotle called the "deliberative" function. The aim of rhetoric in this case was to help the listeners find the best possible course of action in a given situation. We translated this function in our statement of Kierkegaard's aims as "conceptual clarity." Kierkegaard's distinction from Aristotle here is that he wanted to make the sharpest possible break between ethical-religious or qualitative analysis and factual or quantitative analysis. His aim in conceptual

clarity was to draw these distinctions out of the perceptual tangle of the listener's situation and bring the qualitative issues to the fore.

The distinction Kierkegaard makes is a necessary one for religious discourse. Without it we would slip back into mediating and compromising away the absoluteness of the Gospel's demands. But we should not be tricked by Kierkegaard's singlemindedness into neglecting the quantitative. If it is a question of loving the neighbor, for example, it is true that we must have our inwardness in order. But if we love rightly, then we want to do everything in our power to see that our love is effective for the neighbor. This will inevitably involve us in a quantitative analysis as we try to guess at the probable outcome of our works of love. To serve its proper end, preaching will at times need to perform both types of analysis, while confusing neither. We will need to be "wise as serpents and innocent as doves."

The need for both practical deliberation and theological and personal clarity is clearly present in the issues that have impressed themselves upon the contemporary Church: world hunger, poverty, development issues, ecology, militarism and revolution. Here the question of moving people to act is overshadowed by the tremendous complexities that seem to erode any given proposal. Well-meaning Christians in Iowa, urged on by special appeals from the pulpit, send tractors to help farmers in Kenya to grow enough food. The Kenyans sell their oxen to buy fuel; their tractors break down and they can't get parts, nor can they plow, because their oxen are gone. When word gets back to Iowa, the church folk are hurt and confused, and the pastor

feels a little foolish. These little tragedies are multiplied by the hundreds in the Church's social programs. There remain many who are willing to act; they just don't know what to do.

There is no way out of this dilemma for the pastor. To rest content with creating a general good will while leaving the details to the experts is to follow the same course that created the problem. Yet if mere moral earnestness does not allow us to make policy pronouncements, neither does the Gospel allow us to keep silent. There is no substitute for educating ourselves and our people in the complexities that both inhibit and demand our action. This does not mean to turn the pulpit into a lecture platform, only that such education may prove a pre-requisite for preaching what needs to be preached. Kierkegaard wanted to "jack up the price" of Christianity in terms of inward appropriation. We would only add that the price of knowledge has gone up as well. And we should not overlook the educative function of engagement itself. At least the Iowans had their mistakes to learn from.

The bond of preaching and praxis is by no means limited to social problems. The counseling function of preaching demands its own reference to praxis. Kierkegaard documented the spiral of despair that comes with an inability to choose, to gain one's self in action. Psychiatrist Robert Coles puts the matter simply: ". . . we have to do something with our problems and tensions and anxieties. We have to put

the past to use as well as meet up with it and analyze it."<sup>34</sup> Both preaching and program can go far toward providing a therapeutic context of action. Preaching in particular could learn much from the vast literature of spiritual guidance and "exercises" in the Christian tradition. A striking feature of this literature is the abundance of quite explicit, often severe directions for making adjustments in the listener's life. To help people out of their despair by offering them meaningful activity is one of the chief graces Christianity has to bestow.

Unfortunately, a fair amount of counsel from the pulpit moves in the opposite direction. It seeks to calm, to reassure and comfort. At its worst, it is the spiritual equivalent of Valium. Perhaps a good deal of this emphasis on the palliative comes from an appropriation of the goals of the more popular forms of psychology: to produce happy, well-adjusted, "emotionally mature" people, to promote "the fulfillment of human potential." These aims and their attendant language, conceptuality, and techniques have had tremendous impact on the contemporary American church. Preaching has widely come to be seen as a form of group therapy by addressing specific life situations and helping people solve personal conflicts. Church programs have likewise been directed toward meeting needs on a psychological basis: pastoral

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<sup>34</sup> Robert Coles, Eric H. Erikson: The Growth of His Work (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970), p. 291. Coles is summarizing Kierkegaard's influence on Erikson.

counseling centers, marriage enrichment programs, fellowship and growth groups for singles, the divorced, and widows.

There is nothing inherently wrong with all this, but our reading of Kierkegaard should give us a little dialectical caution here. To treat Christianity as an instrument of psychological health, even if it is the best instrument, is to distort it. Judged by the criterion of praxis, we have to question how well this style of preaching and these programs interpret the Gospel. There is much in Christianity that offers peace and comfort, but there is also suffering. In many ways the Christian life is conflictual, maladaptive to social norms. It asks us to deny our potential in some respects, to sacrifice it in service to Christ.

It is not that psychological health and Christian faith are incompatible; they are incommensurate. Psychological health is a good in itself, and has its place as a goal of preaching in the form of ministry to the suffering. But it stands under the command to follow Christ, and in that sense it is entirely equivocal. Many persons who may be judged "disturbed" by psychological standards (perhaps including Kierkegaard) can be followers of Christ without gaining any pay-off in the form of making them "better adjusted." And many happy, fulfilled, even perfectly delightful people have nothing to do with Christianity at all. It is not suggested here that we should abandon the very fruitful relationship between preaching and counseling, only that we must strive for a therapeutic that is genuinely Christian.

A final point about praxis-oriented preaching is that it condemns itself to change. If you call for action and get it, the context for future preaching is altered accordingly. By contrast, preaching that reflects only upon itself can go on indefinitely in the same manner. The pastor can find a form and style he/she likes and stick with it. The question of change arises only negatively, when the preacher feels he/she is getting "stale." But if there is true "upbuilding" in the congregation then the character of preaching should change over time, not only in the outward sense of "keeping up with the times" and the newspapers, or in reflecting the pastor's theological changes, but to reflect the inward growth, the "stages" in the upbuilding of the congregation.

The changes in Kierkegaard's discourses from the aesthetically-oriented Edifying Discourses to the "highest pitch" of Anti-Climacus provide a rare, perhaps unique example of a developmental approach to preaching. The local pastor has the same opportunity, but with more resources available: Christian education, program, counseling, a relatively stable point of reference in a single congregation, and a sermon every week. With all this apparatus it is only reasonable to ask where we will go with it.

There is as yet very little in the homiletical literature to guide us here; it remains largely focused on the single sermon. Surely the problems posed by long-term planning and evaluation of preaching should have their place on the agenda of homiletical research. Our preaching will change anyway. It is simply a question of whether it

will develop haphazardly, through the entropy and rejuvenation of our enthusiasm, or through theological reflection on the course of Christianity in our congregations.

Before leaving the subject of preaching and praxis, a few comments on its implications for homiletical pedagogy are in order. Among the many forms of resistance seminarians exhibit to instruction in preaching, one of the strongest is that preaching seems to them to have little to do with the forms of ministry that most inspire them. They want to counsel, to teach, to engage in social action and community organizing; they are full of ideas for creative ministries, but they do not want to preach. While these other areas of ministry appear to have an obvious utility, they are not yet clear about what good it does to preach. Perhaps they classify it under the "caretaking" category along with church finance and pastoral calling. Often, if one probes a little deeper, another, more subtle resistance appears: they are spiritually shy. They feel that they lack sufficient experience in the faith to speak with authenticity, especially to their "elders."

These two responses are related. Kierkegaard hints at their connection in a perceptive passage from his journals:

It is no doubt true that one learns by teaching others, but sometimes it can also be detrimental. Thus, when a young theological candidate makes too early a start in preaching to others, there is swift reprisal. It becomes a habit for him to depict the gloriousness of faith, for example, as glowingly and imaginatively as he is capable of doing. His actions, meanwhile, are unrelated to what he says, and up to now there has not been a chance for it because he has attempted so little. When it then

becomes obvious that he just is not becoming an apostle right away etc., it is likely to end with his abandoning it completely.<sup>35</sup>

Seminarians all too rarely have an opportunity to relate their classroom sermons to any ongoing Christian praxis. Their instinct is correct, although often misstated, in finding a contradiction in this situation. They rightly emphasize the priority of actualizing their faith before undertaking to preach.

Two possible remedies come to mind. First, homiletical training could be integrated into the parish studies or internship programs. This would give the student an actual congregation to work with, and provide a context in which the student's other responsibilities in the parish would give him/her the necessary reference to praxis. It would require a fuller integration of the student into the work and worship of the congregation than is often the case, but this in itself would be salutary. A second approach would be to see that the seminary itself was engaged in active forms of ministry, rather than limiting itself to reflection on someone else's praxis. Homiletics would surely find an ally in the Christian Ethics department for such an undertaking since it could provide much needed reality testing for both disciplines. This pattern is very strong in a number of Third World seminaries, where human resources cannot be squandered, but there is no reason it could not be adapted to North American seminaries as well.

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<sup>35</sup> JP III, #3465.



In the five topics discussed above we have, I believe, a workable model of the main disciplinary concerns of homiletics, leaving aside the boundary issues of biblical exegesis on one hand and individual performance on the other. There are metarhetorical foundations in a theology of communication and theological anthropology and in their corresponding forms of homiletical argument; methods of audience analysis, rhetorical strategies and a homiletical aesthetic based on these foundations; and a constant reference to the Christian praxis toward which our preaching aims. According to this model, whatever coherence homiletics attains will come from tracing the implications of research in any one of these areas for each of the others. Reference to such an overall model of the discipline would also provide a ground of comparison and critical evaluation of contrasting homiletical theories. And most important, it would provide a guide to the individual preacher in coming to a clear understanding of his or her own approach to preaching.

In drawing this model out of Kierkegaard's rhetoric, we have in a sense "deconstructed" him. Having drawn a coherent rhetorical theory out of Kierkegaard's authorship, a theory that is inseparable from his understanding of Christianity and his place in Danish Christendom, we have in this concluding chapter abstracted out its constituent parts and used them to characterize a collective discipline. In the process of generalizing we have neutralized many of the distinctively Kierkegaardian rhetorical commitments. That is, we have not suggested that Kierkegaard's concept of the stages form the basis of our

theological anthropology, or that his existential dialectic should be the model of homiletical argument--only that anthropology and dialectic are necessary elements in homiletical theory. We have in a sense "become objective" in that the model of homiletical studies suggested here is descriptive and analytical rather than prescriptive or normative.

This I believe is not at all contrary to the spirit of Kierkegaard. For perhaps the best way to avoid objectifying in homiletical theory what can only be a matter of passionate personal conviction is to conceive of the discipline as a meeting ground for the sharing and testing of these convictions as they come to expression in our preaching and our homiletical theories. This is surely more promising than continuing to hand out advice on how to preach without regard to who the preacher is and what he or she believes.

The preacher who has followed this study this far may complain with some justice that the notion of homiletics developed here asks rather a lot of a humble pastor. In addition to being counselor, administrator, theologian, and teacher, there seem to be added the burdens of anthropologist, psychologist, logician, and literary artist. The burden is precisely the point, and in that there is some good news and some hard news. The good news is that much of the theoretical groundwork that Kierkegaard did on his own is properly the shared burden of a community of scholars. That is why we have laid so much stress on disciplinary concerns in this final chapter: few preachers are given either the leisure or the genius of Kierkegaard to work it out alone.

The hard news is that with preaching as with Christianity itself, Kierkegaard did indeed make the task more difficult--but only as difficult as it ought to be. The burden of preaching is but a special form of the burden of being a Christian, and it cannot be lightened, but only guided, by the services of scholarship.

It is a person who preaches, not homiletics, and the deconstructed elements of homiletical theory we have discussed here can only be reconstructed and brought to life by that person. The discipline of homiletics may finally stand no closer to the actual preaching of sermons than literary criticism does to the writing of novels. Both activities precede their critical and theoretical counterparts, and the creativity and fidelity to the truth their practitioners bring to them cannot be legislated by a discipline. The difference between the two is that while the literary artist is free to imagine, the preacher must strive to be what he or she says. This is the requirement, the burden of preaching, to say it one last time: to present the truth in its truest form.

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